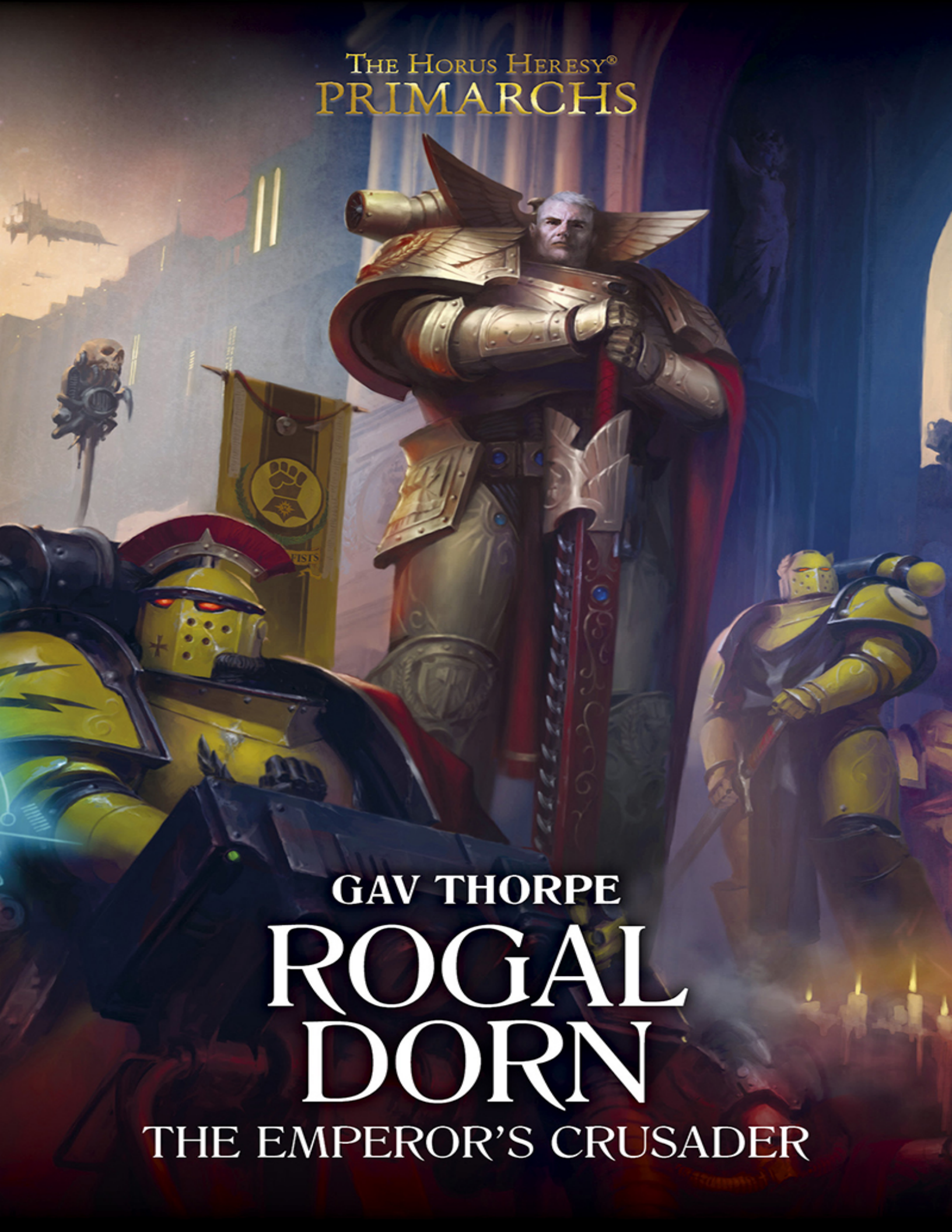
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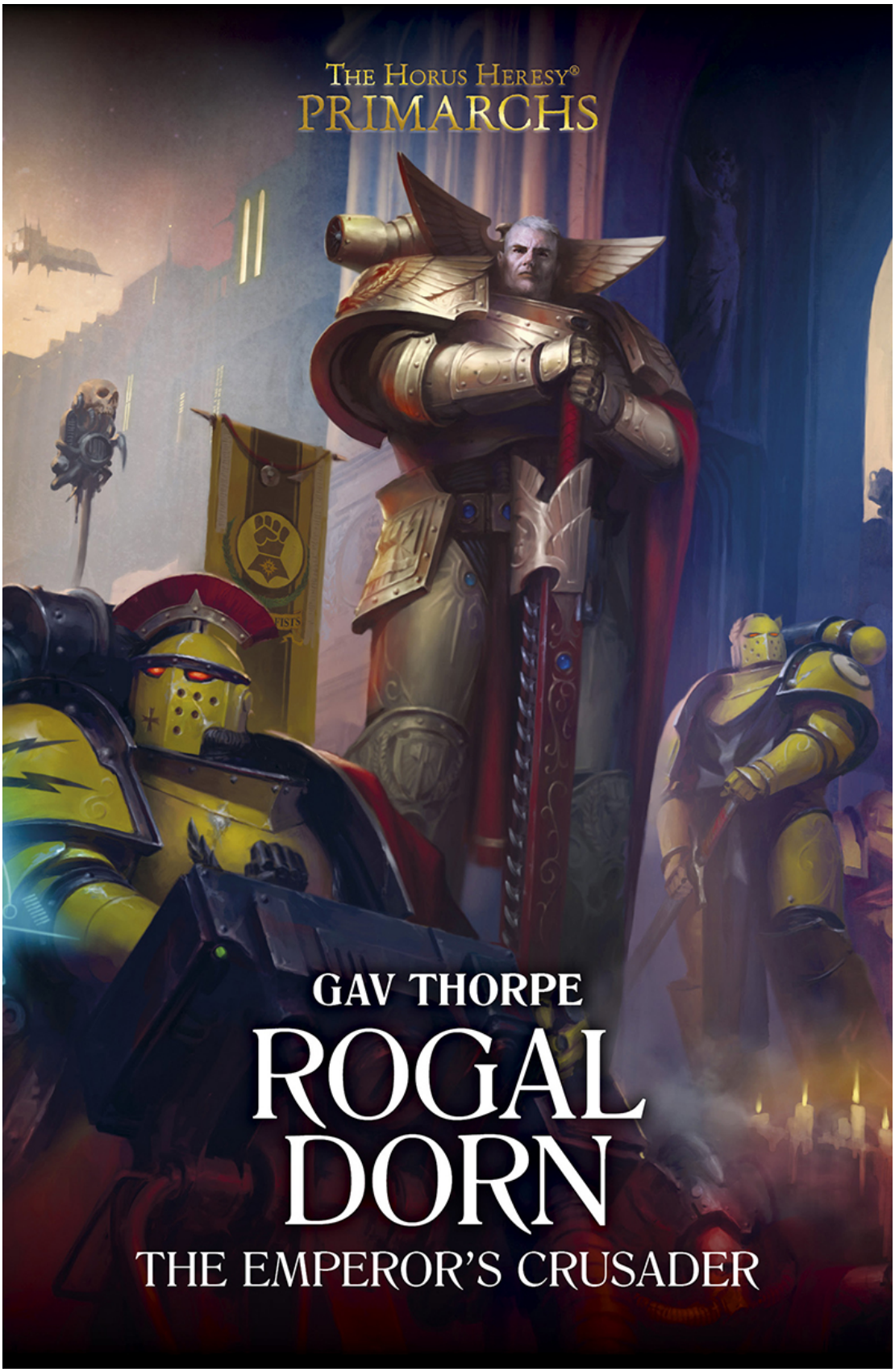
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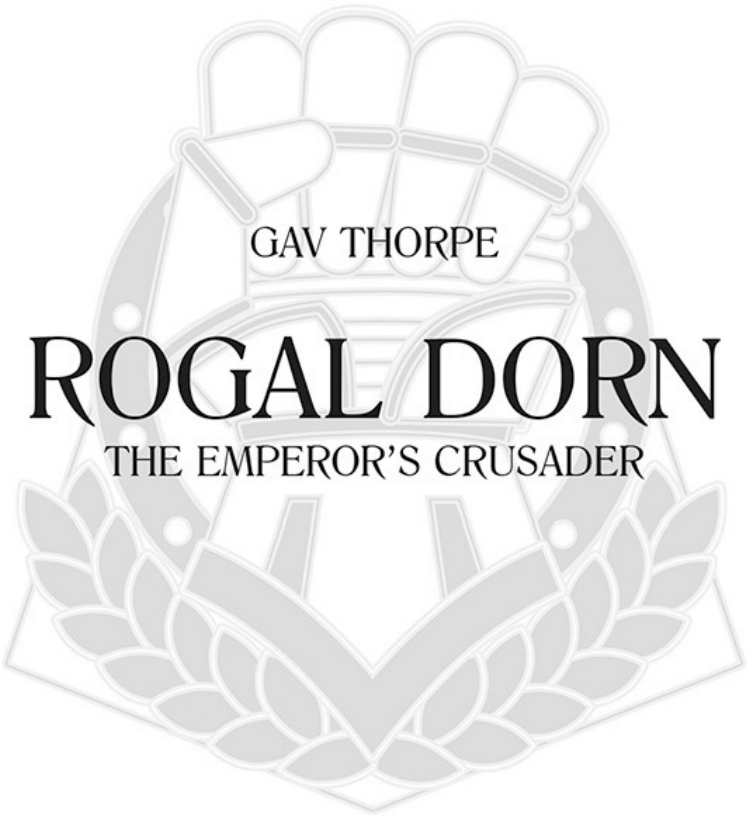

GAV THORPE

ROGAL DORN

THE EMPEROR'S CRUSADER

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Two pairs of eyes looked up through the clouds of Terra, as if to pierce the vast distances of the Solar System and the veil of warp space itself. They had looked on more than twice a human lifetime's worth of death and destruction, and yet what was to come would eclipse everything they had seen before.

He was nearly here. The one that had been called Warmaster. The Traitor.

Horus.

With him came an armada that dwarfed even the largest endeavour of the Great Crusade. Soon, the two heroes amongst heroes would be accompanying their primarch back into space, ready to contest the void against the ships and warriors of the traitor fleets. For now, though, a few rare minutes of contemplation were shared by two battle-

brothers who had been apart as much as together yet were bonded in ways neither could explain. The road they had travelled had followed much the same course but ended in two very different destinations.

'Why us?' Fafnir Rann asked the emptiness.

'You know better than to ask such questions,' replied Sigismund. 'Madness to search for truths that don't exist.'

Rann turned his head to look at his companion, mouth half-open, his expression a contested land in a battle between humour and incredulity.

'*You* say that, of all people…' Rann gaped before he saw a telltale flicker in his companion's eyes. An exceedingly rare moment of jest. He shook his head.

Sigismund's humour faded as he turned his cool gaze on Rann.

'Why do you look for meaning?' he asked. 'It is not in your nature to question the course of life's river.'

'The question wasn't of the future flow, but of the course already carved.' Rann took a deep breath. The air was thick with the fumes of war industry and the dust of construction. If he tried really hard, he could pretend he remembered what the chilling, clean air of Inwit's ice cities tasted like. 'How did we end up here, on this wall, and not out there with the other Legions?'

'By the will of the Emperor, of course,' said Sigismund. He stepped forward to the ferrocrete rampart and looked down. Engines chugging, a line of twelve Leman Russ battle tanks snaked along a causeway from the gate, heading for mustering yards a hundred kilometres to the east. The paint on them was already darkening in the smog. 'After Ullanor, when the Emperor withdrew to His works beneath the Palace, Dorn was given command of Terra. So here we are.'

'You still misunderstand me, brother.' Rann banged a fist on the crenellation. 'Though it proved bad, we knew at the time why Horus was made Warmaster. The best of the

primarchs, it seemed. Forthright, beloved by his brothers, capable. There had to be an equal reason why the Emperor chose Dorn to return to Terra. Why not Sanguinius, whom we all would follow? Or Guilliman? What better primarch than the architect of the Five Hundred Worlds to sit upon the Council of Terra?' He dropped his voice. 'Or even Perturabo, if the Emperor were inclined to a castellan who would defend His homelands – though unequal in temperament, one matched almost in accomplishment to our gene-father.'

'A match that will be tested very soon,' growled Sigismund.

'Why any of them, when the Great Crusade was unfinished?' Rann almost paid no heed now to his fellow Imperial Fist, caught up in his wondering. 'Malcador as Regent, why bring a warlord, and why the Lord Dorn?'

'Because He did not want a statesman, or a castellan, or a chancellor. I cannot believe the Emperor had any premonition of the calamity that has befallen us, so it was not for siegecraft that our gene-father was chosen. Have you wondered what our lord's brothers would have done, had any of them been asked to return to Terra to babysit a council of administrators and tax collectors? Would Guilliman have wanted to interfere with that process? What of the temperament of Perturabo, the paranoia of being overlooked growing stronger ever day? Sanguinius, chained to a palatial cell rather than taking his glory to the far distances of the galaxy?'

'I see your point.' Rann rubbed the back of his hand across his scarred cheek, memories stirred. 'Duty to the Emperor above all else. Our lord proved that at Compliance Nine Forty-Three.'

'Because he allowed Fulgrim the honour of breaking the ork stronghold? Perhaps, but Dorn proved to the Emperor that he was the most dutiful before then – at Thysson's Sound, when Angron pursued the enemy into the gulf of

stars, and we remained to protect his supply lines.’

‘Being dependable isn’t always about staying behind. Remember when Lord Dorn led the first attack on Epelliant Helos even though the fleet wasn’t fully assembled?’ Rann’s gaze moved to the horizon, remembering those days of bloody urban fighting. The campaign had cut off a burgeoning enemy counter-attack, which would have been disastrous for the Imperial forces had it gained momentum. ‘We lost many legionaries. Lord Dorn knew the cost and still acted.’

‘Rogal Dorn has been the Praetorian of the Emperor for a long time.’ A voice drifted from a shadowed doorway behind them. ‘Long before even he realised it. It was already clear to the Emperor after the Night Crusade, one hundred and sixty-five years ago.’

It could have been a year or a second since the Spaetum assault ram had launched. Ghosting across the void on inertia alone brought a motionless, timeless quality, not even disturbed by the rumble of the ram’s attitude jets now that it was set on its course. There were six other assault craft, three ahead by thirty seconds and two keeping pace with the ram that Rann was aboard. Back on the *Terran Messenger* there would be frantic activity: void shield generators overloading, crash doors closing, damage control teams racing from place to place. Somewhere ahead, a few hundred kilometres away, the enemy station continued to unleash its ire as devastating blasts of las-energy. But not here. Here, all was silence and stillness.

Sat encased in his armour, in turn cocooned within the thick, armoured hull of the Spaetum, Fafnir Rann kept his eyes closed, resisting the urge to glance at his helm-display chronogauge. For a few minutes there was nothing to do but wait, and he took pleasure in the detachment.

There was nothing to say. His warriors and the other squad sharing the cramped confines of the boarding vehicle

knew exactly what to do and when. As legionaries of the 45th Assault Cadre in the Tenth Crusade of the VII Legion, they had been in this situation or similar at least a score of times. Even Rann, new to his position as sergeant, could conduct the initial boarding procedure without conscious thought; conscious thought would slow down the entire action by several seconds.

His mind wandered back to the task soon to be at hand, and it annoyed him. Without distraction, his natural inclination was to his purpose as a warrior of the Emperor. He opened his eyes.

Three minutes exactly until attack velocity.

The two squads were already arranged in assault formation within the body of the ram. The ten Astartes of the breacher squad were held upright in their harnesses, two staggered rows of five facing towards the main assault ramp at the front. They would close and lock shields the moment they were down, a mobile defence as secure as a fortress wall. The Legion tactical squad, Rann's twenty warriors, were split into two groups, secured on angled benches that allowed them to rise and accelerate out through the flank hatches in two seamless waves.

At two minutes, Rann glanced forward to the breachers. Sergeant Iago raised his power axe in a signal of readiness.

'Scan data incoming,' the pilot told them over the intervox. *'Punch-through at target zone ninety-eight per cent likely. Ingress route direct ahead, elevation standard. First assault wave adjusting target point by fifty vertical to bypass hangar level. No update orders received.'*

'Acknowledged,' replied Iago, the senior of the two squad leaders and therefore de facto force commander until they linked with Lieutenant Pollux. His next words were addressed to every legionary aboard. 'We need to get out of the breach zone fast to make up that distance. Adopt pattern Strike-five on clearing the impact site. Specialist gunners to take up point positions.'

Acknowledgements crackled back, including Rann's. He wanted to contact the pilot to check whether there had been any enemy sensor contact on the incoming boarding force but knew better. If there was something to report, Dagerron would inform them.

Now, time was becoming impossibly slow as each second ticked down. Rann knew it was a side effect of physical changes brought about by his augmented body and stimulant discharges from his war plate. He was experiencing everything at a heightened level and so, conversely, the outside world seemed to drag.

The assault rams had been launched under cover of mass battery fire and torpedo launches, heading towards the largest of the orbital defence stations – the command centre in the estimation of Lord Dorn. Total surprise was the goal, and so far the plan appeared to be working.

Other starbases were being attacked by the fleet of the assembled Legiones Astartes, and Rann wished there were a window through which he could watch the unfolding battle.

'How's the war going?' he voxed to Dagerron. 'Are we winning yet?'

There was a pause while the pilot consulted the limited scans and reports at his station.

'Above predicted progress, I'd say,' he replied. *'The First, I mean the Dark Angels, have already eliminated two bases in sector four. Massed boarding actions led by the Tribune have cleared sector eleven. The Phoenician's ships are–'*

Iago's voice cut across the link.

'Vox clear. Thirty seconds to assault range.' There was no tone in the words, but Rann felt there was a rebuke all the same. Iago was entitled to be uptight: his squad would take the brunt of enemy attention in the first phase of the engagement.

Time crept along.

Rann tensed, but still the sudden force of the assault jets

firing jerked him sideways inside the grip of the harness. Within seconds the assault ram's fuel burnt out, but it was already travelling at an extra five hundred kilometres per hour. The remaining void space would be covered in less than twenty seconds.

'Ten seconds to impact,' warned Dagerron.

Though he was still immobile inside his armour, it seemed to Rann that the whole craft might shake itself apart. The rattle and creak of the hull was joined by a growing hum as the melta-dischargers in the nose built up power for the breaching blast in the milliseconds before contact.

If they failed, or the armoured skin of the enemy starbase was thicker than the scans indicated, the ram would crush itself flat in the next five seconds.

'For the Emperor!' barked Rann. 'For Rogal Dorn!'

Others spoke their dedication and uttered oaths of duty, the confines of the hull resounding with mechanically edged voices. The next few seconds raced past. The meltas fired and the ram ploughed through slag and steam. Iago's squad thundered out along the prow ramp before it had fully opened. Rann launched out of his seat as the harness snapped back, bolter in both hands, accompanied by the crash of armoured boots.

The enemy were waiting, but it did not matter. Their weapons filled the breach zone with muzzle flashes and bullets, but the shields of the breacher squad were as impenetrable as those of the base itself. The tactical squad fanned out around the centre, plasma gunners and flamers to the fore. The corridors beyond the impact site filled with starbursts followed by sheets of burning promethium.

To the flanks, hidden by the curve of an arterial corridor, another two legionary teams advanced in parallel. Three armoured punches aimed at the heart of the space station. Iago's force made a hundred metres in the first ten seconds, trampling over the ruptured and charred bodies of the defenders. Rann paid them no heed, attention fixed

ahead, bolter ready to cough forth an explosive round when a head or limb poked from cover.

‘Overlapping counter,’ warned Ordera, flashing his auspex screen towards Rann. A tendril of life signals was curving around them towards the impact site. Maybe ten or fifteen of the enemy.

‘Dagerron, you’re getting company. Discharge and disconnect in five seconds.’

‘Understood.’

Iago set a brutal pace with his breachers, securing a stairwell and taking them up three levels at a sprint. A dull thump of detonations and the sudden disappearance of the flanking signals reported the assault ram’s frag launch and departure. Environment detectors in Rann’s war plate warned of dropping atmospheric pressure as the air evacuated through the gouge left in the hull by the craft’s exit.

‘We have contact with the control centre, transmitting coordinates,’ announced Lieutenant Pollux. *‘All forces, converging assault and then maintain cordon, one hundred and fifty metres. Dispositions to follow.’*

The control centre would not hold out for long against sixty legionaries, with another ninety to protect against counter-attack. One minute since breaching and the action was almost over. In the void the enemy had been deadly, their ships heavily armed and armoured for their size. Face to face… not so much. In minutes their orbital defences would be overrun. The combined power of three expeditionary fleets was a force that nothing could withstand, and the Scathian System had not proven otherwise. The route to the planet’s surface was open and that left only one question.

‘Who will command the ground attack?’

The question came from Captain Eidolon of the Emperor’s Children and hung in the air with the tri-D representation

of his well-formed features. The image flickered while the vid-capture units on the *Pride of the Emperor* kept track of the warrior as he paced across a deck of the battleship's strategium.

'We have elements of four strike forces and support flotillas ready to drop on three major conurbations in the southernmost continent,' he continued. *'Every minute we waste gives the enemy chance to prepare.'*

As the Master of the Huscarls, Rogal Dorn's bodyguard, Gidoreas knew his lord as well as anyone could. Seemingly immobile in his bulky suit of Cataphractii armour, he nevertheless watched for a reaction, gauging the primarch's thoughts so that he might better serve.

Rogal Dorn stood in his full golden war plate with one fist held in the other hand. The fingers flexed slightly in response to Eidolon's assertion, but the primarch's face remained as though carved from deepcore ice. His hair was white-blond, short but not close-cropped, unruly despite an attempted parting on the left side. Some would consider him handsome, though his severe expression held a distant, unapproachable quality. Like one of the bastions his Legion erected so swiftly, Dorn's demeanour was a defence against intrusion and few could breach it. The primarch waited a second to see if anything more was forthcoming and then gave the slightest of nods, accepting the argument made.

'A sensible proposition, except that Seventh Legion battalions have already cleared orbit over the northern strike area and we are ready to begin mass deployment, not just an insertion attack. My forty thousand legionaries hitting the ground will break their resolve within minutes, forestalling any need for wider commitment and risk.'

Eidolon opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by the third participant in the holo-council. His fair-coloured beard and long hair reflecting ruddy action lighting from the *Invincible Reason*, Lion El'Jonson, primarch of the First, strode forward, his hand slashing the air like a blade.

‘Unacceptable!’ Green eyes flashed with anger, but the moment passed, and the Lion’s demeanour settled into one of earnest entreaty. *‘We have not bloodied ourselves in the void to relent at the edge of orbit. My ships are breaking through towards the equatorial defence stations, which will eliminate the threat to both your attack and that of the Phoenician’s Legion. My knights will be first on the surface, but I assure you that we will share the battle honours.’*

Gidoreas suppressed a grimace and saw his counterpart from the Emperor’s Children silencing a retort. It was not for a captain, even a Legion equerry, to argue with a primarch. Here, in the massive grand strategium of the *Phalanx*, they were surrounded by decks and sub-decks of legionaries and attendants monitoring the massive craft and its accompanying flotillas, but sophisticated dampeners ensured that the command dais was cocooned in near silence. Around and below them the deck officers bustled like ghosts, preparing for the final surface assault. Gidoreas could see that all three fleets were already in motion on their respective attack vectors, but command had to fall to someone to stop them from working at cross purposes.

The tri-D projector stuttered as another feed came online. The new arrival was lean of features, the vid-capture managing to snare the essence of eyes in animation as they flicked from one projected primarch to the other and back. His face profiled against a golden wing that swept up from his pauldron, Fulgrim of the Emperor’s Children greeted them with a brief smile.

‘Apologies for the delay in my participation, I believe my equerry has been fighting a valiant vanguard action on my behalf,’ said the Phoenician with a slight bow of the head. Eidolon’s image flickered and vanished. *‘We are at an impasse, but as the most experienced Legion commander here I feel that–’*

‘I have waged war as long as any of my primarch

brothers,' interrupted the Lion. *'If you see fault in my strategy, say thus, do not hide behind a veil of seniority. What reason the First should not abide by their name?'*

Fulgrim's manner did not change, his features set in polite attention through the Lion's outburst. When it was done, the Phoenician pointedly turned his gaze to Rogal Dorn.

'I feel that the Imperial Fists should lead the attack,' Fulgrim concluded. *'The* Phalanx *is by far the largest vessel here, even bigger than our Gloriana-class, brother Lion. As a display of Imperial authority, its arrival and the descent of forty thousand legionaries sends a message that cannot be ignored. Rogal is entirely correct in his assessment.'*

'To split our attack is to risk a harder drop for my Legion and yours,' growled the Lion. *'The loss of momentum could be disastrous to a swift victory if the inhabitants are not so impressed as you say.'*

Fulgrim turned the intensity of his attention to the Lion, slender fingers steepling to his chin in a pose of respectful thought.

'My brother, there is a very important difference between conquest and compliance,' Fulgrim said softly. *'We are all warlords here, but more than that we are the Emperor's primarchs. When He despatched us on this venture it was with the explicit task of bringing worlds to compliance, however that is achieved. Societies broken by war need fixing, requiring resources that are stretched as the Great Crusade continues to expand into the furthest reaches.'*

'That was my thought,' said Dorn. 'We must give the enemy opportunity and encouragement to capitulate. Our reports show that their fleet was their greatest strength. Without it their resistance will be short-lived. I have not fought as many campaigns as Fulgrim, and few have been bloodless, but as the newest member of our brotherhood perhaps your perspective has not yet widened from the wars of your home world.'

Gidoreas kept his expression passive but felt the

primarch’s words, while true, were not the softest. The look of dismay that Fulgrim swiftly hid suggested he felt the same. All eyes, those of primarch and legionary alike, were drawn to the Lion, whose lip curled and brows knotted. For a few seconds he said nothing, one hand moving to the pommel of a greatsword at the waist of his ebon-black war plate. The touch of it appeared to reassure the primarch of the First and he straightened a little, the tension flowing from him just as his lion’s-mane cloak hung from his shoulders.

‘Forgive my impetuous words, my brothers,’ said the Lion. His tone was a little stiff but sounded sincere. *‘I meant no offence, and if my eagerness to prosecute the Emperor’s will has caused such then I apologise. You are correct, I lead a Legion of the Emperor as I would a company of knights, but it is a far greater power I now wield. On Caliban an opponent would not be undone by the mere unsheathing of a blade, but the galaxy at large is not Caliban.’*

‘We are here to unite humankind, not enslave it,’ said Fulgrim. *‘Some may only come under the threat of the blade, but others will join freely.’*

‘Gidoreas,’ said Dorn. The captain stepped forward, ready for orders. ‘Transmit to the fleet, all craft to proceed with the surface attack.’

‘Yes, Lord Dorn,’ the equerry replied with a hand raised to the fist sigil emblazoned on his breastplate. ‘The fleet will be underway within five minutes.’

As he turned and headed to the steps that led to the main communications deck, he heard his primarch’s parting words to his brothers.

‘Let us hope that the enemy know when they are outmatched and wish to preserve not only their honour but also their lives.’

The enemy were hopelessly outmatched, but Sigismund

had to acknowledge that they were not going to surrender without some resistance. A venal salve for their ego or true warrior honour? It was impossible to know.

He advanced down the strange street, one of a knot of warriors with black marking their armour amid a tide of golden yellow. Other squads belonged to the companies of the 29th, 32nd and 45th Assault Cadres for the most part, but he had left behind their ranks while the Lord Dorn was attending the Solar Conclave with the Emperor and his brother primarchs.

Now he was a Templar.

It was not just the wargear that felt different – bolt pistol and chainsword rather than boltgun – but everything else. The Templars were the sword of the force, slashing like a blade-edge into the foe or thrusting forward like the tip. The weight of the other Imperial Fists was the arm and body that followed, turning each cut into a grievous wound. Where the enemy resisted, the Templars pierced their defences. They acted in concert with breacher squads drawn down from their void fight to bring their unique skills and equipment to the urban battles. As a shield against enemy fire, the breachers went in first, turning the axis of attack, deflecting counterstrikes until the moment was right, when the Templars launched their assault.

It felt good to be the blade and not the body or shield.

The city was a maze. Its builders had been obsessed with triangles: the streets met each other in triangular layouts, the structures in between entered by triangular doors, their walls lined with tall three-sided windows, pyramidal roofs high above. Perhaps the aesthetic was a result of the three moons in orbit, or some mythology of lost origin whose consequences remained thousands of years later.

The greater number of their foes fought in bulky red-and-orange combat suits, heads protected with visored golden helms. The impacts of the enemy’s bullets and the legionaries’ bolt detonations rang along tiled corridors and

chambers, echoing from high overhead, while the crash of boots reverberated from the tall windows as the Templars pushed into the lower storey of a building that had been turned into a strongpoint. Zigzagging ramps with balustrades led to the upper levels instead of stairs. Dozens of the natives crouched in the cover afforded by the stone parapets, unleashing their fire on the Imperial Fists from above.

'Lance!' bellowed Aeolus, the Master of Templars, the greatsword in his hand shining with fiery reflections.

The Templars moved as one, a fighter changing stance, narrowing formation while three breacher squads moved forward to take the enemy fire. Sigismund continued to shoot his bolt pistol as he drifted towards the back of the formation, picking off enemies on the upper levels of the ramps who were firing down over the heads of the breachers and their shields. Masonry chips flew like shrapnel, and gold-visored soldiers fell back, dead, injured or suppressed; it didn't matter for what would come next.

Other Imperial Fists entered the broad hall through shattered windows and broken doors, their bolters and heavier weapons taking up the fusillade while the breachers pushed into the teeth of the enemy shooting.

The breachers moved to the ramp, some raising their shields to heighten the mobile wall. The Templars were drawn forward in their wake, filling the gap between tactical and heavy weapons squads, readying themselves to attack as a warrior positions the sword-arm.

'Lunge!' came the shout from Aeolus even as the order to split sounded across the hall from Lieutenant Pollux of the breacher company.

The shield squads moved with split-second precision, as did the Templars. The breachers parted and the blade struck through, Aeolus at the head of a wedge of gold and black, Sigismund four ranks back on the outer left. Any foe that managed to survive those in front fell to the lacerating

teeth of his chainsword or the explosive bolts of his pistol, their bloodied bodies trampled in the advance, reduced from sentient life forms to inconvenient footing in seconds.

'Redoubt!' roared Aeolus above the crash of combat.

In their attack, the Templars had piled up bodies to the front. Two of the brethren had fallen and they were brought into the interior of the formation while breachers pounded up the ramp to either side.

'Apothecaries!' Sigismund shouted, holstering his pistol to help as the broken-armoured forms of Lassitur and Erudae were passed out the back of the Templar company like pauldron fixative extruded from a Techmarine's servo-arm. A pair of white-armoured figures arrived with an escort of tactical legionaries and the two Templars were carried away, the screech of armour cutters diminishing with distance as the Apothecaries began their work.

The next thrust gained the first switchback, forcing the Templars to fight for several seconds under direct fire from above, until the shield squads interpenetrated through them and were able to take the brunt again. It felt slightly unnatural for Sigismund to let others fight in his stead, but while the Templars still trained for individual excellence, the VII Legion worked on the principle of the fist – the power of the blow that comes from all the elements working as one.

Sigismund had to remind himself that despite his acceptance to the Templars, he was not a lone warrior. In the ashen circle he wielded the great blade, but in battle it was pistol and chainsword. Templar, yes, but a legionary still. A champion sometimes, but always part of an unstoppable war machine. As he knew how the chainblade in his hand would perform, so Rogal Dorn depended on his Templars to be just as reliable.

The chainsword did not ask of its wielder who it cut down. Sigismund shared its disinterest in that regard. By Dorn's will he killed or stayed his hand, nothing more, and such

would be his life until he fell.

‘There will be no bombardment,’ commanded Rogal Dorn. ‘Not yet. Repeat signals calling for their surrender.’

Gidoreas regarded the metres-wide hololith showing the unfolding situation. Golden sigils represented the thirty thousand Imperial Fists already deployed. The three main drops had yet to link up. While this was not disastrous, the occupation was already an hour and more behind Dorn’s meticulous schedule. Smaller displays showed more detailed schematics, while out across the broad expanse of the *Phalanx*’s strategium, the Master of the Huscarls could cast his gaze to vid-screens and active links that showed static-ridden, live action from the surface.

On the main display other runes signified subsequent deployments of the allied Legions, both of which were making headway but also at a slower pace than anticipated. The inhabitants of Scathia had proved to be far more stubborn than reckoned, although they were clearly losing on every front. Ships of all three Legions held orbit and atmospheric craft dominated the skies. Whether in six hours or sixty, the planet would comply.

Gidoreas wondered what the enemy thought of the situation. If it was that stern resistance might see some relent in the Imperial attack, then they chased a false hope. Scathia had been chosen as the ‘gateway’ world for the nascent Night Crusade. It was ideally positioned both spatially and within the erratic flows of the warp, a key system to funnel troops and resources from worlds already brought to compliance out to the expeditionary fleets that would be venturing into the area known as the Occluda Noctis. As such, the bulk of three Legiones Astartes had been deployed to ensure its swift capitulation.

That the Scathians had decided to fight against such overwhelming force did not speak well of their culture. Millions had already died for what Gidoreas had to assume

was pride. It was also starting to be more costly than envisaged for the Imperial forces. He looked at his primarch, but Dorn's expression was unreadable.

The primarch turned his head, as though feeling Gidoreas' gaze.

'You have a question, captain?'

Gidoreas was taken aback and it took a second until he realised that he did have a question, though it had not formed until that moment.

'I understand the need to avoid widespread collateral damage with massed bombardment, my lord, but we have strike ships in position for pinpoint orbital support. Their intervention would greatly speed the advance of our troops.'

'Whilst potentially stiffening the resolve of our foes,' countered the primarch. He crossed the platform at the heart of the grand strategium, hundreds of lights dazzling across his golden armour, his massive form eclipsing the main hololith. 'We cannot send missives asserting that we come as allies not conquerors if we pile up civilian dead. In all battles the purpose is foremost to defeat the enemy, and that does not always mean wiping them out.'

The primarch stopped a few paces away, his head inclined slightly towards Gidoreas, eyes fixed on the captain.

'If you see a legionary fall beside you, does it make your determination waver or harden?'

'I understand, my lord,' said Gidoreas. 'I am also aware that many legionaries, ours and our allies', are falling right now. There is a point at which our concern to preserve life must extend to our own.'

'Every second, I weigh up the possible outcomes of a thousand variations of our current strategy and the countless alternative courses of action open to us.'

Gidoreas nodded. He had been with the primarch for several years but was still surprised by his abilities, both mental and physical. Legion Master Mathias had been a

logistical and strategic genius, but he would have needed the entirety of his support staff and a constant stream of reports to manage a campaign as complex as the drop and pacification they were undertaking. The lord primarch needed only to cast his gaze across the scores of displays and attendants, reading the people as well as their stations, to know how matters progressed.

'Apologies, my lord.' Gidoreas rubbed a ceramite-sheathed hand across the stubble on his chin. He had remembered that he had once tried to grow a beard as a youth, before being recruited, and had decided to return to the notion, but it had reached a stage where it itched fiercely. 'I sometimes forget my role. I recall our purpose with more clarity now, as the Emperor bid us when we were first raised. "Victory is not enough. To conquer, one has not only to defeat one's enemies, but also to hold the fruits of that victory." Words I shall carve into my thoughts more deeply.'

'Exactly that, Gidoreas, exactly that.'

Dorn stepped away, eyes moving to the massive hololith display. His hand swept to various areas, and they highlighted in gleaming red. Gidoreas immediately saw they were the most embattled elements of the drop force.

'Orbital strikes will smooth passage to their objectives, yes?' Dorn did not turn round, the question rhetorical. 'How many more of your gene-brothers survive? Ten more? A hundred more? What if, in supporting that attack with strikes into civilian areas, we kill the family of a politician or destroy a holy place? The people fight for longer, perhaps days, weeks more of bloody, grinding war because of a dozen lance strikes. How many legionaries fall during that extended conflict and yet bring us no closer to peace?'

'My concern was ill-founded, Lord Dorn,' Gidoreas assured the primarch. 'I see military solutions, but your strategy encompasses far more.'

'It is a balance,' replied Dorn, again clasping one fist in his other hand. 'Fail to achieve tactical victories and you make

no progress towards strategic goals. We cannot get ahead of ourselves.’

‘No, my lord.’

A few seconds passed and then Dorn looked sharply to the left, beyond the hololith to one of the communications stations on the lower deck of the strategium.

‘Lion El’Jonson is going to launch his next assault,’ the primarch said quietly.

Gidoreas followed his lord’s gaze and saw Lieutenant Efried striding away from the console servitor with an autoscribed message in his fist.

‘Alert navigation and the fleet, we will be manoeuvring for support drop and bombardment.’ Dorn returned his attention to the hololith and manipulated the display until it showed the line of fortifications and conurbation where the Dark Angels had dropped. The schematic updated with icons past the walls and heading into the city. ‘The time has come for a final show of our intent.’

‘We are launching the second attack wave, lord?’

‘Yes, but we will do so in support of the Lion. I believe he has located the planet’s political capital. Calculate fleet movements to bring us alongside the First Legion ships and prepare a message to their primarch to the effect that we stand ready at his word.’

‘At his word?’ Gidoreas spoke before he could stop himself. ‘My lord? Command was granted to you.’

‘And now I am giving it to the person better placed to use it, captain,’ Dorn replied sharply.

Gidoreas knew better than to say anything else. He saluted and bowed his head in acknowledgement of his orders. A few seconds later, Efried mounted the ramp to the observation deck.

‘My Lord Dorn, the primarch of the First Legion sends dispatches. He has broken through the defences and believes he is closing on their planetary leadership. He asks that we move in support to ensure that encirclement is

complete.’

Dorn had turned his attention to a display above the navigation stations where the fleet dispositions were shown, any interaction with his subordinates paused while he calculated the next sequence of events.

‘I have our orders,’ said Gidoreas, stepping past the primarch, taking the rolled plastek from the lieutenant.

As they descended, Gidoreas spared one glance back at his Legion commander, still unsure of what he had witnessed. Any other individual might have thought the Lion’s ‘request’ presumptuous, an attempt to settle the score for his earlier failure to gain command. Dorn was not only prepared to relinquish his authority for the good of the campaign, but had also predicted such an occurrence. It had been a decade since the primarch had been united with his Legion, five years since Gidoreas had been promoted to equerry. Not in that time had he seen Dorn so forthright, so focused in his decisions. This was the primarch’s element, the Huscarl realised. This was Rogal Dorn operating at his full potential, and it was humbling to watch.

It was not so much the absence of ego that surprised Gidoreas; he had seen pride occasionally get the better of Dorn. His strength came from utter conviction that he was doing the right thing. Not arrogance, just an overpowering sense of purpose that had been ignited by the recent Solar Conclave with the Emperor. He did not know for sure what had passed between the Emperor and His sons, but there was talk of the exchanging of fresh oaths, the reaffirmation of the Great Crusade’s purpose. Whatever the Master of Mankind had said to the primarchs, it had stoked the fire inside Rogal Dorn, and now he burned brighter than Gidoreas had witnessed before.

A fire that would light the galaxy or consume them all.

The light of burning palaces reflected from the lenses of Master Aeolus’ helm as he addressed the assembled

Templars, three hundred of them, nearly the full company. They lined the rubble-strewn remnants of a boulevard that led into the heart of the capital, three ranks deep on either side. Companies had been pulled back from the fighting all over the planet to provide suitable honour guard for the primarch, in expectation that the Dark Angels and Emperor's Children would be doing the same.

'This isn't a victory parade, we haven't won yet. It's a war council.' Aeolus strode along the centre of the road between his Templars, his greatsword in his left hand, its blade against his shoulder pad. Broken masonry crunched under his heavy tread. 'I want you to look on our bloody work and be proud. Those that refuse the Emperor cannot be allowed to work against Him. Resistance begets retribution. Compliance or conquest. We are just at the beginning of this crusade into the shadows and there will be a thousand foes yet to fall beneath each of your blades. Where we are going there is only darkness. We must carry our light with us, be it the lantern of enlightenment or the burning brand of destruction. The Imperial Truth binds us, but our blades define us. Now, stand proud before your primarch and the other Legions, secure in the knowledge that we have honoured ourselves in their gaze.'

Sigismund watched Aeolus head into the plaza that had been designated as the landing field, its bizarre abstract statues torn down, the facade murals of decadent scenes fractured and cratered by shell and bolter round. His gaze moved along the lines of his brothers, their armour bearing the same scars of harsh fighting. Only the promise of rightful extermination would make a foe fight with such rabid, pointless intensity. And as the enemy had feared, so had the primarch and his brothers been forced to act. There was no more negotiation, no new attempts at peace or even a contemplation of ceasefire to allow the iterators to begin their work bringing the great plan of the Emperor to the ignorant.

Against such unreasoning hate only the bolt and blade could answer.

The flare of drop-ship engines announced the arrival of the primarchs, each accompanied by squadrons of fighter craft in the colours of their Legions. Rogal Dorn had chosen a landing site large enough for all three Stormbirds to descend together, no hint of priority or hierarchy between the sons of the Emperor. In a precisely coordinated flourish the atmo-craft of the Emperor's Children did a last spiral flight around their primarch's drop-ship and then soared back towards the heavy clouds, their rolling sonic booms timed to sound like an eleven-gun cannonade salute that echoed over the ruined city.

The drop-ships landed and disgorged their contents: Dorn with his gold-armoured Huscarls, the other two primarchs followed by their companion honour guards. Fulgrim's Phoenix Guard in shining purple and gold marched beneath a long banner that looked like a flowing Imperial aquila, flanking their lord, while the primarch of the Dark Angels walked at the head of a column of his elite warriors under a flurry of banners in red, black and white, adorned with Calibanite heraldry.

There had been speculation, swiftly curtailed by the Master of Templars, that the primarchs had to meet on the surface because they could not agree whose flagship was suitable to host such a council. It seemed obvious. The *Phalanx* was as large as a starbase, far outstripping the facilities of the capital ships of the Lion and the Phoenician. Yet it was not his decision to make.

A rumble of engines heralded the arrival of a hundred bike-mounted Dark Angels, emerging from side streets to ride escort. Fulgrim was speaking, gesturing frequently as the trio made their way up the road towards the remnants of the old regime's parliament. Dorn occasionally nodded while the Lion was shaking his head, his mane of hair tousled by the smoke-filled wind.

Sigismund's augmented senses picked up their words as they approached, though he had no context to understand them.

'…go over this again,' Fulgrim said. 'Once committed to a course of action, we have to see it done properly or the whole endeavour becomes pointless.'

'Your Legion precipitated this, Fulgrim, and now we have to deal with the consequences,' snapped the Lion.

The snarling of bike engines blocked out further sounds as the escort rode past, taking up station at the far end of the processional in a semicircular formation. As their engines dropped to idling, Sigismund caught a last exchange between the primarchs.

'When faced with no possibility of compliance, there is no alternative but to eliminate all opposition,' Rogal Dorn told his companions. 'It is unfortunate, I would have avoided this outcome if possible, but matters have moved beyond any of us to reverse this course. We are only just embarking on this expedition into the Occluda Noctis, there are far sterner tests to come. We do not need to leave a potential foe at our backs, nor can we leave behind sufficient garrison to guard against future revolution. The dead do not become rebels.'

'Graves rather than slaves?' quipped Fulgrim with a faint laugh. He laid a hand briefly on the arm of Rogal Dorn and looked across him to the Lion. 'I know you feel that this is somehow dishonourable, but you need to remember something important. We are among the savages and xenos here. They do not have honour, and they do not deserve the benefit of your mercy. It is a gift that is wasted upon them. Save it for those that will embrace the Imperial Truth.'

The Lion's reply was swallowed by distance and the grumble of the Dark Angels' bike squadrons. As the rest of the honour guards passed – Huscarls, Phoenix Guard, Paladins of Caliban – the clouds on the horizon were lit by red, and seconds later a massive detonation rumbled across

the city from the east.

Sigismund did not react, but it was a reminder that, all across the planet, the enemy were still fighting, giving their last breaths against those they saw as invaders. As the opening stage of a much grander campaign, it certainly left no illusions about how hard the wars ahead would be. Being a Templar meant that he would be in the white-hot heart of the fighting and for the first time since he had been plucked from a shack rooftop on Terra, he finally thought he had found his purpose.

There seemed no purpose to the enemy attacks. Their commanders dead, their political leaders executed, their cities in rubble, still the Scathians thought they might prise the grip of the Emperor from their world.

Perhaps it wasn't pointless, Fafnir Rann decided. They knew what awaited them. There were no more broadcasts for surrender, no terms issued, no chance for peaceful compliance. Facing extermination, who wouldn't fight? Pride alone would make one stand up and want to take a shot at the bastards that had come to kill you. A very human reaction. To spit in the eye of the executioner.

The particular gobbet of phlegm currently marring the Legion was fierce, uncompromising resistance outside one of the remaining industrial sectors. Even after they had abandoned their political centres, the Scathians had continued to protect their infrastructure. In a surprisingly short time, much of it had been converted to war industry, even as the number of people to crew their factory-new vehicles and wield their freshly machined weapons dwindled daily. Though they were restricted to a single system, it seemed that the Scathians were no strangers to interstellar war, which reminded Rann that this would not be the greatest challenge they faced in the coming months, not by some margin.

A fortified region of power plants, mills and manufactories

sprawling across one of the main routes through a barrier range of mountains around the final bastion of resistance had now baulked the advance of the 45th Assault Cadre for several days. Other formations had been held up at different access points, contesting with terrain as well as fanatical enemies.

An hour ago, Rogal Dorn had arrived to assess the situation and take battle command.

Rann felt honoured that the primarch had chosen his sector of the front to strike at the enemy, though he could take little credit for that. Happenstance more than anything had placed them on the eastern arterial route directly into the centre of the Scathian fortified zone. Ahead a crag of a castle, a mound of reclaimed rubble and plasteel that jutted out of square kilometres of ruins, had domination of the road. Flak guns bristled from its flanks and the anti-orbit weapons of the industrial fortresses beyond kept the fleet at bay for the moment.

Very much a problem that could only be solved with troops on the ground.

Reinforcements from other formations had been brought in at the word of the primarch, along with the contingent of a hundred Huscarls that had dropped with him. Rann could see them a few hundred paces to his left, their gilded armour stark against the dark slabs and broken bricks on the far side of the cracked, pitted ferrocrete highways that ran along the valley floor. To either side rose terraced embankments choked with debris and cut through with access roads littered with rubble. Scan sweeps had shown no life signs outside of the ramshackle fortress ahead.

The vox fizzed and then brought a single word of command from the primarch.

‘Begin.’

Legionaries with flamers moved through the ranks of the forward squads, each flanked by a breacher with shield at the ready. Dozens of heavier, multi-firing weapons had been

placed by the enemy amongst the ruins of the buildings that had once straddled the broad streets ahead, pits dug into the shattered masonry and slopes of tumbled brick. They were silent for now, but their presence had been made known in previous assaults.

The initial foray by squads with jump packs had been repulsed, the weight of fire discouraging despite the angle of assault, so the tacticals and breachers had been deployed to cover the ground more cautiously but effectively. That had been too slow, giving the gunners time to concentrate their fire, protected against the Imperial Fists' support weapons by the remains of their stronghold. Unable to force a path, the commanders had brought in artillery to suppress the foe.

Rann had watched with disinterest for the last day as many shells had been expended turning rubble into smaller pieces of rubble.

Now, with the primarch, a new sense of purpose had been injected into the attack, just as Rann's modified body and armour systems flooded his blood vessels with stimulants. He felt the contraction and expansion of muscle and armour fibre bundle as one continuous sensation, a warrior with a skin of plasteel and ceramite.

Rann was close to the front of the attack column, just behind the breachers, afforded an almost unimpeded view. Ahead, the primarch and his Huscarls led the charge, eschewing cover to advance at speed between fallen masonry and burnt-out wrecks on the highway. Long-range fire snapped down from the enemy positions, melta shells slagging the highway surface, occasionally striking down a legionary's war plate.

To Rann's left and right, tracers slashed the air, but he paid them no heed. The surest way to survive was to close the distance and engage. Anything else simply gave the enemy more time to improve their aim.

'Heat plumes!' The shout came from Ordera, auspex

whining in his hand as he swung to the east and then the west. ‘Both flanks!’

There were more bellows from the Huscarls ahead, and the vox crackled into life with warnings from squad leaders and officers alike.

Rubble trembled then cascaded down the slopes of the shattered buildings. A renewed volley of fire from the dug-in heavy weapons added to the sudden influx of signals. Crashing and roaring, armoured vehicles as large as Baneblade super-heavies burst out of concealment, shouldering aside the broken remnants of walls, their dual-cannon turrets emerging from clouds of mortar fragments and dust while clattering tracks pulverised stone and tile.

‘No life signals!’ Ordera’s exclamation wasn’t so much a caution as a shout of shock. ‘Nobody inside!’

‘Driven by abominable intelligence,’ snarled Portok, the legionary to Rann’s left. ‘What happened with our aerial recon?’

Lieutenant Pollux was snapping off orders quicker than the blasts of the defenders, but the company had gone from assaulting to ambushed in seconds, completely out of shape to deal with the four behemoth war engines whose turret guns now unleashed armour-cracking blasts of concentrated light into the heart of the assault squads at the rear.

Ahead, Lord Dorn acted. The gold-clad giant pivoted towards a tank on the left, pounding across the roadway with long strides, the Huscarls sprinting but still unable to keep up.

‘Split and counter-attack, use the tanks themselves as cover,’ ordered the lieutenant. Rann caught a glimpse of him striding towards the right, his power sword held up like a banner to form a rally point.

Rann couldn’t spare more time to watch, his own situation was far from ideal. One of the machine-guided super-heavies was less than two hundred metres away, crashing

down the lip of a terrace directly towards the first line of breachers. Its turret blazed with las-power and two legionaries to Rann's left were vaporised by the scarlet beam.

A glimpse of gold in his peripheral vision and the resounding crash of a titanic impact made him remember Dorn's immediate response was counter-attack. Now, he could see why. The enemy tanks were too close, and though dozens of Imperial Fists fell to the first impetus of their attack, the company split and raced into their fire, using speed rather than armour to weather the onslaught. More of Rann's brothers were slain during the next few seconds, blasted apart by ruby light. The breachers surged ahead despite the burden of their shields.

'Iago!' The breacher sergeant was just in front of Rann, a flurry of red beams from one of the hull guns spitting from the power field of his shield.

'Go ahead,' came his strained reply.

'Elevation boarding,' snapped Rann. He had his bolter aimed at the nearest tank, but there was nothing to shoot. Controlled by an unliving machine mind fed information from dozens of sensors, the vehicle had no commander or driver slit to target, and all but the tracks were housed in slabs of thick armour. Rann ventured a single shot against the links, but the bolt-round exploded uselessly against the blurring metal. 'Right flank.'

The artificial minds of the tanks were slow to respond to the sudden counter-attack, churning onwards even as the legionaries broke formation and raced down their flanks. Secondary weapon systems spat more laser fire, but much of it was ineffectual against power armour, spraying and sparking from helms, breastplates and pauldrons like a celebration display.

Rann risked a glance towards his primarch and grinned at what he saw. Rogal Dorn was stood atop a clanking behemoth as though riding an ice floe on the Great River,

his massive chainsword on its hanger while he used both hands to prise at the turret ring. As Rann watched, Dorn's ceramite-clad fingers found purchase, tearing the slope-armoured assembly away from the chassis with a detonation of electrical sparks and threads of twisted metal.

'On your mark,' answered Iago, drawing Rann's eye back to the task at hand. The breachers slowed as they reached the right-hand side of the huge war machine, turning to keep pace with the rumbling tank. Rann led his squad forward at a sprint.

'Now, brother,' barked Rann.

As one the breachers dropped to a knee, shields angled as ramps towards the high flank of the tank. A split second later the tactical squad reached them, springing onto the shields and then leaping metres high onto the topside of the vehicle, boosted by their brothers.

Rann almost lost his footing as he landed further to the back than he had expected, on the slope of the turret, the tank having accelerated to break away from the Space Marines swarming around it. Its secondary guns had not been positioned to deal with such an attack, but the tank to the left recognised the danger and turned its anti-personnel weapons onto its boarded companion, las-sparks bursting from the armoured hull around Rann as he made his way towards the rear where his auto-senses smudged an orange blur of heat exhaust across his view. Heat plumes meant motor discharge, which meant a vulnerable spot.

Half a dozen of the squad had made the jump and they followed their sergeant to a grate just behind the main turret.

Following Rann's example, more squads were trying to board the other vehicles, which were swinging their turrets and spinning tracks in an attempt to sweep away and shake off their attackers. Gunfire from the enemy highway fortress streaked through the smoke and dust around Rann,

the gunners aware of the danger to the tanks. The enemy commanders had been patient, leaving the armoured giants dormant until the critical time to strike. But they had not reckoned on the abilities of a primarch and his legionaries…

‘Down!’ shouted Klauz, just behind Rann. The sergeant and the others dropped to the armoured back of the tank. The warning came too late for Gherios, the barrel of the main gun bending as it smashed the legionary off the side of the tank, hurling his broken form to the ground.

Getting back up, two of the others prised off the grate with fibre-bundle assisted fingers, exposing a throbbing engine core that emitted a faint blue light from a nest of twisting cables that glinted on brass sockets. Rann had no idea how it worked and cared even less. Another pair threw their strength against the spinning turret gun, armour servos besting mechanical gears with a shriek of grinding metal.

‘Grenades, all of them,’ Rann told the others, pulling fragmentation charges from his belt. Fourteen in all went through the hatch before the sergeant and his legionaries jumped from the back, landing in the ruts left by the massive tank tracks.

A few seconds later smoke and flame billowed from the tank’s innards, a fountain of shrapnel and engine parts showering down onto its armoured top as it stopped with a screeching of broken gears.

‘Iago, Rann, good work.’ Pollux emerged through the fog of oily smoke and dislodged grit. Red beams and shells continued to scythe down from the fortified position while one of the tanks had broken free and was making distance, its cannons cutting down more Imperial Fists. ‘Sharply now. Form up for assault on that strongpoint.’

Rann and Iago accepted their orders and called to their squads. Two of the tactical squad were down, another of Iago’s warriors. Nearly a score of ochre-armoured bodies in the rubble testified to higher losses among those that

hadn’t responded so quickly.

Rann saw Dorn through the smoke, the ruin of the tank behind him as he and the Huscarls resumed the advance towards the enemy strongpoint. Iago set off with his men, Rann close behind, eyes fixed on the gun pits once more. Behind were dozens of yellow-armoured warriors, and a few gold. Rann couldn’t fault the enemy for fighting to the last, but every one of his brothers that fell was a victim of a vain refusal to accept the inevitable, and for that he hated them a little more.

‘Victory was inevitable,’ said Dorn, his hand moving across the star charts scattered across a broad wooden table that had once served the ruling council of Scathia. The charts, like the hall the council occupied, were all that remained of the people of the world. An inauspicious start, to begin the campaign with genocide, but already hundreds of resettlement, administrator and Mechanicum ships were arriving to begin the work of turning the system to its new Imperial purpose. Less than a week after the final execution shot had been fired, all minds were turned to what came next. ‘The question is simply what the cost will be. All of humanity stands ready to serve the Emperor – it is not a question of numbers, only time. Yet we are faced with a situation where that guarantee does not seem so certain.’

From his position to the side of the council of primarchs, one individual studied Rogal Dorn closely. Esuin Rigantis de loro Navis Fir Zuma, representative of the Navigator House of Zuma and the most senior of the Navis Nobilite contingent, had been brought in for this specific expedition, given rule of not only the cadre that guided the *Phalanx* but also authority over the rest of the Imperial Fists’ Navigators. It was an unprecedented position, a political coup that had catapulted House Zuma to one of high status. The rights and contracts that followed would swell the

coffers of Rigantis' family.

But the prestige and wealth came with a risk – a risk so dire that Rigantis had almost turned down the opportunity. Given the challenges ahead, only those of truly superlative Navigator power would prevail, and that had meant attending the fleet in person. He, the Zuma Novator, potential Heir Apparent to the Paternova, the apex of the House, had to lead the contingent. It had been more than twenty years since he had last left the orbital above the House estates on Terra, having earned renown and a position within the Magisterial Houses in the opening decades of the Great Crusade.

His future, both personal and the legacy he would leave, was in the hands of the Imperial Fists' primarch. To hear him speak of uncertainty before the campaign had properly begun was not at all welcome.

Lion El'Jonson appeared equally discommoded by Dorn's pessimism.

'We command one of the greatest fighting forces ever assembled, Rogal. Do not take our tarrying on this rock too hard.' The primarch of the First glanced at Fulgrim, who was watching Dorn with a hand raised to his chin, the other fidgeting with the ornate hilt of the sword at his waist. 'It was not our intent to engage in extermination at the outset, but that must always be considered a possibility for every star system we enter.'

'I understand you, brother,' said Fulgrim, his hand moving to smooth a finger along the decoration of his breastplate. 'We all read the reports, and their abrupt ending. Four expeditionary fleets lost over ten years. These stars do not wish to give up their secrets easily.'

'None of the expeditions mustered half as much manpower and ships as this one,' said the Lion. He approached the table, leaving behind the dozen Paladins that accompanied him, their banners almost touching the ceiling of the former council chambers. Everything except the tables had

been cleared away but there were still bolt-round scars on the walls, and the windows were smashed. A darker patch on the red carpet close to Rigantis' left foot was very likely dried blood.

'A thousand blinded warriors cannot win victory against a single warrior with sight,' Fulgrim argued. 'The issue is not guns, is it, Novator Zuma?'

Finding himself suddenly drawn into the discussion, Rigantis moved forward, leaving his entourage of Navis guards. In response, as if the inclusion of the Navigator also gave them invitation, several others left their own coteries of advisors and military: Archduke Admiral Khesya of the Imperial Army, in full dress uniform of wine-red doublet with white slashed sleeves and knee-high black boots over light blue trousers; red-robed Autarthix-Cent of the Martian Mechanicum, an infant-like censer bearer vat-slave tagging at his heel; Heraslk Gilt of the remembrancer corps along with the Iterator-Prime, Hugost Wacim, both in green robes with white collars and cuffs. Rigantis wore a loose black shirt with brocaded front and equally baggy and dark trousers, his feet buckled within a pair of broad shoes. Less austere than a robe, the voluminous clothes nevertheless were good at concealing the more apparent mutations of Rigantis' Navigator genes, as well as the inserted callipers in his arms and legs, and the spinal bracing, that allowed him to continue to function in non-zero-gravity environments. Even so, his stride was stiff and arrhythmic, his arms crooked as he walked over to the table of star charts.

'It is never about raw numbers, my lords,' Rigantis said with a lopsided smile. He nodded to Rogal Dorn, who stepped away from the table with a wave of the hand to signify that he was giving way to the Navigator. 'A primarch plans and the warp laughs. An army fifty billion strong can't conquer an undefended moon if they have no ships to get them there. And if you have the ships, you must make

sure they all arrive in timely fashion. Where we're heading, all of that is multiplied tenfold, maybe a hundredfold.'

'These captured charts show systems further into the Occluda Noctis, they must be of some use,' said the Lion. 'We encountered ships from this world dozens of light years away.'

'Indeed, these charts are useful, and well researched,' replied Rigantis. He made a show of leaning over and examining them again even though he had spent the last turn of this world studying them intently. 'The nomenclature is nothing like our charts but not indecipherable with context. Distances seem relative rather than actual, perhaps measured in time not spatial measurements. We also know from examinations of captured ships that they were capable only of small warp jumps with their existing technology. Our problem is of a different nature. The Emperor's guiding light, the Astronomican, has allowed the fleets of the Imperium to spread far across the galaxy, but without it we are no better than some squalid backwater that's just invented its first warp engine.'

'You led me to believe that you could solve this problem,' Dorn said gravely, facing Rigantis with a hard stare. 'Now is not the time to walk back your boasts.'

'Not boasts, lord primarch, not boasts at all.' The head Navigator moved around the table to a salver with a jug of water and some glasses on it. He half filled one and held it in a spindly, extra-jointed hand and with the other pointed to the exposed lumen bulb above the table. 'The Astronomican originates from a single point and allows us to position ourselves roughly in relation to Terra. It is not an exact science, due to the inconsistencies of the warp and the unidirectional nature of the Astronomican. One might think of it as a lighthouse. You can see where it is, and how far away, but cannot know for sure the bearing along which you observe it. My associates and I can sense

from which point the Emperor's light originates, but for exact positioning we must use our observations and calculations, along with other warp beacons established at key translation points and muster stations, and for want of a better term, certain landmarks.

'Terra,' Rigantis reminded them, pointing to the lumen, his purple-painted nails glossy in the yellowish light. He lifted the glass so that the lumen sparkled through it and moved his finger into the fractured light dappling his pale face. 'Us. The Occluda Noctis, the Night Zone, lies in a shadow cast by the great turbulence we call the Northern Major Warp Storm. That's the glass… We venture into the systems on the far side, into its shadow, you might say. But that is a misnomer for Navigators. Other psychic beings, perhaps even the Emperor Himself, may He Rule Eternal, cannot pierce the warp's depths beyond the occlusion, but the Astronomican is not completely blocked.'

'It is dispersed, like the light?' said the Lion, tilting his head. 'You can still use it to navigate from system to system.'

'Barely.' Rigantis lowered the glass and swirled the water with a finger before lifting it again. 'This warp storm is immense, the largest we've encountered by a huge margin – a churning whirl of energy tearing together realspace and warp space. What little of the Astronomican passes through it is highly fragmented and distorted.'

'But you can still use it, I presume,' continued the Lion. He looked at Dorn. 'That was the assurance given?'

Dorn nodded and approached the table again, his looming bulk stifling Rigantis' reply. The Navigator withdrew a step without thought, giving ground to the gene-forged son of the Emperor. He could feel the depth of presence within Dorn and the others, like a weight upon his soul, and curiosity made him long to remove the band that shielded his third eye – the warp eye that could see through reality and pierce souls. Yet he knew he'd be dead within a split

second, the gesture mistaken for an attack.

'It will not be easy, and the further into the Occluda Noctis we venture, the harder it will get,' said the Imperial Fists' commander. 'It will be impossible to maintain coherence as a single expeditionary force, but I believe that is why the Emperor did not send just one of us. Like it or not, we have been tasked by our father to bring those star systems to compliance, and delay will not aid us. The fleets that went before were lost somewhere in the depths of the Night Zone and we must confront that threat as soon as possible, rather than avoiding it.'

'You refer, of course, to our brother's entreaty to move around the north-west of the Occluda Noctis towards his home of Caliban,' said Fulgrim.

'It makes for a perfect staging ground, as I have said.' The Lion moved towards the charts too, further forcing Rigantis aside. 'It is not delay to ready one's footing before swinging the blow, it is a sensible preparation.'

His contribution no longer required, the Novator drifted back to his guards as the primarchs continued to discuss their plans, drawing in others as and when it served a point they were trying to make.

For Rigantis, having reiterated the task ahead, the first plunge into the galactic shadows now imminent, the prospect of braving the Occluda Noctis felt very different to making the intellectual assertion of its possibility from his quarters back at Sol. While the council rumbled to a close without conclusion, he reminded himself the gamble was worth it. A year or two among these warlords and the benighted stars would make House Zuma pre-eminent for a thousand years.

It would be nice to survive to enjoy that success himself, all the same.

'... two... one. Success! I knew this old thing was working. Voice capture active. No vid-capture at this point, but I

need to record this event while I can. I am Larentius val de Meer, remembrancer of Terra attached to the First Legion of the Legiones Astartes. This is the first time any of our group have been permitted down to the surface of Scathia. Fire and rubble as far as the eye can see, but we're standing in the nearly intact remains of some political institution and three primarchs are discussing the course of the campaign ahead. It is quite animated, the atmosphere in the chamber charged, the hairs of my arms prickle just being here.

'The Lion has suggested that the crusade forces split, one heading to the north-west and the other south around the warp storm to come at the Night Zone from the galactic east, bringing compliance to a ring of outer systems before working inward. He asserts that this will give them opportunity to see better what lies in the heart of the Occluda Noctis before heading into the depths. Fulgrim is quite dismissive, advocating a spiralling course that moves the fleets on a gradually inward route, allowing them to cover the ground, as it were, at some speed. Given that all three have recently returned from purge operations elsewhere on the planet, the Phoenician seems exceedingly well groomed. Apologies for having to describe this, I wish my vidcorder had been allowed out of quarantine, but all non-military servitors are currently sequestered in case of xenos or heretek technophages and other corruptions.

'Rogal Dorn is vehement in his assertion that neither of those proposals meets the demands of the Emperor, although only these three magnificent commanders are privy to the exact wording, of course. How grand would that have been, to record the Solar Conclave, but I am far too junior and the final council of the Emperor and primarchs took place behind closed doors.

'The Lion has gone very quiet, I don't think that's a good sign. Fulgrim remains good-natured in the face of some bullish arguments by Lord Dorn. The primarch of the

Seventh wants to push directly into the heart of the shadowed systems, before forces are leeched away on garrisons, patrols and lines of supply duties.

‘I’m no strategist, but all of these plans seem to have mer–

‘The Lion is leaving! With a parting remark about needing to finish what’s been started, he has rejoined his entourage and is leaving the chamber. Fulgrim has called for him to return, but… Yes, the contingent from the First Legion has gone. Lord Dorn has returned to studying the maps on the table, but Fulgrim is telling him that there’s no point. They will have to agree the strategy, all of them.

‘I’m being called away. I’m with the First, I’ll be abandoned here if I don’t go.

‘Quite remarkable events, as I said. This grand endeavour, this Night Crusade, will need its leaders to create common ground and quickly.’

Gidoreas moved quickly across the strategium to stand beside the other captains and notables aboard the *Phalanx*. As at the fractious conclave on the surface of Scathia, Fulgrim and the Lion were present with their own attendants. Despite the strategium being large enough to accommodate several hundred legionaries, it had been agreed that each primarch would bring only those that would truly add to the discussions – the most experienced and highest-ranking of each Legion’s present companies.

Four figures in white armour trimmed with black advanced abreast through the massive entryway, and it came as no surprise to Gidoreas to recognise all of them. He had, in fact, spent some time with the Mournival of the Luna Wolves while the Solar Conclave had occupied their masters. He greeted each in turn with a raised fist to the chest: Torgaddon, whose smile was fleeting but sincere; Sejanus, who seemed as constant as the stars themselves; Keyshen, the fleetmaster, much of his face and body replaced with Martian cybernetics but his stare as intense

as a star; lastly, the newest arrival, Abaddon, who gave Gidoreas nothing more than a glance, eyes fixed on Rogal Dorn.

And after them came Horus Lupercal. Gidoreas had not seen the primarch in person before. It seemed that Horus' attention was everywhere at once, his gaze meeting Gidoreas', fixing him in place for a second as though the legionary had been struck by a graviton gun.

'In your own time, captain,' the Luna Wolves primarch murmured as he came level, reminding Gidoreas to announce his arrival. The Huscarl did so and the next instant, Horus was raising a hand in salute to Dorn and the others, affecting stiff formality. 'Permission to come aboard, Commander Dorn?'

'Granted,' Dorn barked back, taken by surprise by his brother's tone. He relaxed as Horus smiled. 'Of course. Your presence was missed these past weeks.'

'And I wish I had been here, but some of my fleet was delayed by unexpected resistance and needed revictualling. When the Emperor tasked the four of us with taking the Night Zone, He made it clear we needed to be prepared for one of the longest campaigns of the crusade.'

'I sent our proposed strategies, but it would not have been right to choose one without your opinion, brother,' said Dorn.

'You need me to break the stalemate, you mean,' Horus declared, striding across to join his brothers. They each looked a little chastened, their inability to unite behind a common strategy perhaps highlighting not just differences in command philosophy but something more personal. Horus continued before any of them could speak. 'They are all fine plans, each with its merits and counterpoints. What else would we expect from three of the Emperor's great sons? During any other campaign I would say that any would suffice, but as there was no favour for one over the others I have carefully considered all and have come to a

recommendation.’

He stopped, standing next to the Lion, but his gaze on Dorn.

‘So which is it to be, brother?’ said Fulgrim, with perhaps more edge than he had intended. ‘Which of us do you back?’

Gidoreas felt eyes on him and turned his head to see Sejanus looking at him. The Luna Wolves captain gave a subtle but reassuring nod.

‘Perhaps Horus has his own plan to propose,’ said Dorn. ‘He is the most experienced of us all.’

‘Thank you, Rogal, and you are right, in a way.’ Horus looked at each of them, savouring their attention for a few more seconds. ‘It is my recommendation that we follow… *all* of your plans. This is a massive area to cover even with four expeditionary fleets, and I see no reason why we should risk treading on each other’s toes as we perform this dance of compliance. Unless we intended to hold hands and advance as one great mass, we are limited by the speed of travel anyway, so we each might as well pursue different but complementary strategies.’

‘What of the fleets that came before and were lost?’ demanded Dorn. ‘While that threat remains, any compliance is at risk. Unless we neutralise the force that made those expeditions disappear, we will bleed away too many of our forces protecting supply lines and garrisoning compliant worlds. Four Legion expeditions is a huge commitment of force, but it is not inexhaustible.’

Horus looked at the Imperial Fists primarch for several seconds, taken aback at the vehemence of his argument. When he spoke next, it was not to address Dorn directly, but all three of the commanders.

‘Rogal has a good point. The deepest systems will be some of the hardest tests, and we need a Legion at full strength to face that. That is why I agree that the Seventh lead the way, acting as our ground-breakers and pioneers, straight

into the centre of the Occluda Noctis. Having ensured they are not isolated by taking the outer systems, the other three Legions will then meet them in the heart of the shadow.'

'A decision not to make a decision, that's real wisdom,' said Fulgrim, eliciting a smile from Horus. 'I knew there had to be a reason the Emperor kept you around, brother.'

'It's because I tell the best war stories,' replied Horus. 'Everyone knows that.'

'We are agreed?' asked Dorn, receiving nods from his brothers. 'Then let us delay no longer.'

Gidoreas felt something he hadn't in a while. The air was alive with possibility, the arrival of Horus like a light to a fuse that would send the Night Crusade exploding into action. He could sense the growing presence of Rogal Dorn, a nascent power now coming to the fore as the gears of war started to move again. Feeling it, Gidoreas was willing to push himself past his limits to avoid even the contemplation of the primarch's disappointment, to lay down his life rather than fail his lord.

'Two... one... Don't fail now. Ah, good. Voice capture active. Bless the Machine-God, as the Martians say. Laurentius val de Meer, remembrancer now transferred to the vanguard flotilla of the Seventh Legion's expeditionary fleet, the Three Hundred and Forty-Third. I think that Rogal Dorn's brave thrust into the depths of the Occluda Noctis will provide some of the most historic events of this phase of the Great Crusade. There were some that believed it was the most dangerous assignment of the four Legions involved in this operation and were willing to exchange places with more adventurous souls. Unfortunately, we are back to voice-only recording from here on in, as my vid-servitor succumbed to a flesh rot that began in the visual processor and moved along the cranial socket into the frontal lobes. Amblex D'Varasi, be it known that you are a

scoundrel and a liar. I shall never purchase a used servitor from you again.

‘This is an important moment in the Night Crusade. We have officially passed beyond the uninterrupted light of the Astronomican and into the fringes of the Occluda Noctis. Seven of the last ten systems were wilderness space, no habitable worlds. However, we were contacted by the inhabitants of three systems, a small enclave of human survivors from Old Night known as the Carrefiefdom. They were overjoyed to detect the arrival of our ships. Iterators and compliance teams have been dispatched to their worlds. They speak of another empire into which we are heading, which calls itself the Damareen Consensus. The Carrefiefdom did not speak highly of them, saying that their oldest records accuse the Damareen of betrayal, though the details have been lost to history.

‘While the greater part of the expedition force remains with the Phalanx*, several smaller flotillas have forged ahead to seek out inhabited systems to which the main fleet can be directed. We are the eyes of the expedition, leading them through the darkness. Our scout fleet has translated into what Captain Thrass believes to be a Damareen system. According to the assessment of the astropaths, there is certainly a stirring in the warp that signals a concentration of higher life.*

‘I’ve been allowed onto the strategium of the battleship Torch of Sol*, Captain Thrass’ vessel. There are signs of habitation, including communications fragments and artificial satellites. Standard broadcasts have been sent across all frequencies and using broadbeam, as well as tightbeam missives directed towards the third and fourth worlds, which appear the most habitable for humans.*

‘It may take some time before there is a reply.’

‘…working this time? Yes! Yes! I have to be brief. Along with other non-military personnel, I am being moved to a

chamber closer to the saviour boats. I would not like to say the Damareen response, if that indeed is who we have found, is unprecedented, but it is certainly unwarranted.

'We received no answer to our hails but detected several vessels changing heading for our position. Captain Thrass assured me that this was not uncommon. Even worlds ready for compliance do not often welcome warships loitering at the system edge unmonitored and communications protocols can vary wildly from society to society. In addition, not all worlds have a single planetary authority with the capacity to respond, and Rogal Dorn's orders are explicit. There is to be no pre-emptive military move. After the shocking turn of events at the outset of the expedition, with a potentially compliant world now requiring reconstruction and population restocking, the primarch is keen to make compliance peaceful for as many systems as possible.

'A noble goal but one not appreciated by this system's inhabitants. They launched what appear to be networked attack ships, guided by a small crew in one command ship with five or six slaved vessels operating around them. They were warned to stay back but opened fire in response, rapidly converging on the frigate Herakles*, overloading the void shields and destroying the engines with coordinated fire. Though each vessel hardly masses more than a Stormbird, their firepower is, to quote Captain Thrass, "like a ratling with a heavy bolter". Too small for the massed batteries and lance arrays, these polyships are little more than fast, agile weapon platforms. Targeting the control vessels is also hard, with the slave-ships quickly interposing themselves into the line of fire should the command ship come under fire.*

'There are more enemy carriers incoming, and though, to again quote Captain Thrass, "the Legion could turn this whole system into ash and vapour", the fleet is withdrawing to the Mandeville point for translation. This is according to

the primarch's standing orders. Several escorts have already been lost in the rearguard, but that is the price of avoiding escalation.

'That's the siren warning of translation in sixty seconds. Thankfully, the sacrifice of the escorts has kept the enemy away from the capital ships as they ready their warp engines. They will be remembered. We will return.'

Returning his gaze to his primarch while the other command officers watched Thrass' continuing report on the tri-vid, Gidoreas saw a fleeting scowl before Rogal Dorn readopted his usual expression of tempered determination.

'You have my thanks, captain,' said the primarch.

'My lord?' Thrass' image flickered as he glanced at his bridge officers aboard the *Torch of Sol*. *'I think there might have been a transmission interruption? We lost two frigates and three destroyer-mass vessels extricating ourselves from the system. Imperial Army vessels, yes, but a loss all the same.'*

'But you did not start a war. You have conducted yourself according to my orders, Captain Thrass, when I am sure your experience and training, the warrior's instinct that saw you chosen for the Legiones Astartes, wanted you to fight back. Even now, I suspect that you would like to return for some payback.'

'The Emperor lost good servants, lord primarch.'

Dorn could see as well as Gidoreas that Thrass had avoided the intent of the primarch's words, knowing his feelings were at odds with the attitude for which Dorn had just commended him. It was not often Gidoreas felt the need to take part in these discussions, but he interceded now on behalf of Thrass.

'Any of us would feel a little humiliated, Thrass,' he said, stepping forward into the view of the tri-vid capture. 'It is not in us to allow the enemy to strike blows without response.'

‘I…’ Thrass looked directly into the projection, at Rogal Dorn. *‘I stand down from command of the flotilla, my primarch. I cannot continue in this post in good conscience. I would follow your orders to the letter if I could, Lord Dorn, but I know that I would taint such orders with my desire to avenge my pride and those that have died.’*

Now it was Dorn who was taken aback. Imperial Fists did not resign roles appointed to them by the primarch. He shook his head, brow furrowing.

‘I reject your resignation, Captain Thrass, as I reject your poor self-assessment, as hard as it must have been to voice. I have a higher opinion of you and your dedication to duty. You are one of my vanguard captains precisely because I trust you to make the correct decisions, far from the *Phalanx* and my gaze.’

Dorn took a step towards the image of Thrass but then swung around to Gidoreas, his stare like two las-drills.

‘Fleet broadcast, captain of my Huscarls!’

Gidoreas passed the message down to the communications officer and received the affirmative. Dorn was already watching for it and began.

‘Heed my words, sons of the Seventh, my Imperial Fists. Spread them to ears that cannot hear them now. Legionaries, attendants, Imperial Army, adepts of the Mechanicum, remembrancers and all others of the Terran Administratum.

‘We are here to bring compliance to the galaxy, spreading enlightenment through the Imperial Truth. We have not come to enslave or exterminate worlds like the vile xenos, but to welcome them back into the light after the trials of Old Night. These people are scattered, fearful. We are united, strong. We must forgive them if they do not dare believe their tribulations are near an end, for the prisoner long kept isolated and in the dark never believes the day of freedom will come.

‘It is strong to resist the urge for spite, to not retaliate out

of hand when we are baulked by ignorance, to quieten the roar for vengeance when we see brothers die because of stubborn fear and superstition.

‘The road before us will be hard, harder than any travelled yet by a Legion of the Emperor. I ask of you nothing that I do not ask of myself. I know that my brothers and I must seem so distant, so unlike any servant of the Emperor you have encountered before, and you are right. I would be lying if I said I knew all about myself, or the gene-alchemy that made us. Yet I know that I am, in some way, human. I am more akin to you in mind and spirit than physical difference suggests. I also hear the voices of the dead that whisper to be avenged.

‘Humanity has been plagued by uncertainty since the earliest days of our ancestors, who first looked out upon ancient Earth and up to the stars and wondered what they saw, and who they were to regard it. For more than thirty thousand years our forebears struggled with these questions, creating philosophies, morals, religions and societies based on their intellect, fuelled by their imagination. They created pantheons of gods and animated the elements, all to give themselves meaning in a universe they did not understand.

‘Not for us, those doubts. In this time, in this place, we know precisely the purpose and meaning of life. The Legiones Astartes and the primarchs can look to our creator and know His will, for He does not speak through oracles and mystics, nor cast hints to intent through the written words of prophets. I have stood before Him, and He has told me His plan. His words He has placed in me to give me purpose, as in the myth of the golem of old. We are the enaction of the Emperor’s will.

‘That is not to say our only strength is in restraint. Even as we measure our might and keep our temper, we must remember that compliance is our goal. Resistance cannot be encouraged, nor can rebelliousness be overlooked. As

we have just seen, we will be annihilation, if that is what the Emperor needs of us. Those enemies ahead that perhaps remember our predecessors' coming and think we shall also be swallowed by the night must be shown the error of their belief.

'We will succeed where others failed, not because we are stronger or more numerous, but because we each understand that we are extensions of the Emperor. The Imperial Fists!'

The words of the Imperial Fists' primarch were written on the Temple's wall. They were also seared into the minds of those that were permitted within. For Sigismund they were an affirmation. Not that he held some deep need for revenge, but Lord Dorn's speech had confirmed something that had nagged at Sigismund whenever his mind drifted back to the ill-remembered night in Ionus, a splinter still left in his wounds. The thing that had taken him had not been human, and he had been made into one of the same. He had bowed before a man that would have been thought a child of gods in less enlightened times. In turn, if even half of the legends about the Emperor were correct, they served a being that was immortal, possessed of the power to erase minds and conjure great phantasms in the populations of whole cities.

Where, in that, was humanity?

But with those simple words, spoken candidly, the splinter in Sigismund's soul had been removed.

A very human moment. Not quite a confession, but a speech of openness made just before committing to a dark path, possibly the last road any of them would travel. Rogal Dorn had never been light of touch; his attempts at camaraderie were humoured rather than shared. Gravitas he had in abundance, and that was usually enough, but the primarch had found it in himself to share more than was usual when he had addressed the expeditionary fleet.

A reminder that they fought for humanity's future.

This enterprise was not about the Legiones Astartes or primarchs. At its heart it was not even about the Emperor, for as His servants pushed forwards in the bloody wars of the Great Crusade, so the Emperor was the servant of the greater part of Terra's offspring.

Now, sitting in his harness on a bench inside a Stormbird, nestled in its cradle in one of the many flight bays of the *Phalanx*, Sigismund considered those words.

The leaders of the Damareen had been given one chance to repair the wrong of their first attack: comply with the demands of the Imperium or face the consequences of defying the Emperor of Mankind.

'I'm all for peaceful compliance, for sure,' said Heldar, sitting opposite Sigismund. He still had his helmet off, revealing a face that was ridged with scars from brow to chin. He had joined the Templars not long before Sigismund, not by the quality of his swordsmanship but by simply refusing to go down, eventually weathering more punishment than those he had faced at the Temple doors. 'Together we are stronger. Every human life taken is a life wasted. But, we were made for war. You heard the primarch. This is *our* purpose. These Damareen bastards opened fire on us. That can't go unpunished.'

'Punishment?' Sigismund said it quietly. 'For protecting themselves? You saw what happened at Scathia. Escalation. War is a spiral, a trap of attack and counter-attack, assault and retaliation. One side breaks or is wiped out, that's the only way it ends. Like the circle. Once you step inside, you leave with a victory or defeat, nothing else.'

'The primarch is giving them a chance to avoid war. If the–'

'Lord Dorn is giving *us* a chance to avoid war,' growled Sigismund. 'This isn't mercy, it's logistics.'

Heldar pondered this for a few seconds, grinding his teeth. He was a brute of a warrior, bullish but with speed and

strength to back it up. But he had no finesse, no thought of creating an opening with a step or parry.

'Only a coward avoids a fight, and the primarch isn't a coward.'

'Only a fool starts a fight without reason, and Lord Dorn is no fool.'

Accepting this with a slow nod, Heldar pulled on his helmet, the lenses briefly showing Sigismund his reflection in blood red. When the other Templar spoke, his voice was distorted by the external vox-system of his helm.

'I still hope the Damareen say no. Fighting wars is what we do.'

No, thought Sigismund, keeping the notion to himself because it seemed beyond the capacity of Heldar to comprehend. He laid his hand on the side of his chainsword.

We are bringers of peace. We do not fight wars.

We end them.

The interior of the Stormbird dimmed to emergency red as the vox crackled into life, announcing take-off in thirty seconds.

The Damareen had said no.

You could not say no to a primarch, even if their message was phrased as an invitation rather than a summons. Other commanders that Rigantis had served usually preferred to conduct their councils in a special hall or their personal chambers, but not Rogal Dorn. Whenever the Zuma Novator spoke to the primarch, it was on the command dais of the *Phalanx*'s strategium – sometimes aurally and visually shielded from outside, but normally, as now, without such measures for discretion. It was not as though Dorn needed to be at the centre of things because he was in charge; he barely ever spoke a word to his subordinates, content to leave them to carry out the orders they had been given. But he monitored everything. Even when he was

looking you directly in the eye, Rigantis could tell that Dorn was listening to the rhythm of the strategium, his inhuman hearing seeking some wrong beat or disharmony that signified a need for his attention.

Now, the massive chamber was calm. The enemy fleet had been broken, scattered around the outer orbits while Imperial Fists vessels pushed in-system. Rigantis had noticed that the *Phalanx* was not accelerating after them, which struck him as odd. Coming onto the command dais he saw Dorn accompanied by Gidoreas and several others of the highest echelon of the *Phalanx*'s command, as well as tri-vid projections of four others, three in Legion powered armour and the fourth in the uniform of an Imperial Navy commodore.

It was the equerry, Gidoreas, that spoke first.

'Three Damareen battleships are heading to the warp boundary, we believe they are fleeing the system,' said the captain. 'We think they may be leaving to fetch reinforcements.'

He paused and Rigantis realised he was expected to signal his understanding. He nodded, glancing towards the vague figures on the hololith plate.

'These commanders' vessels are in pursuit, captain?'

'They are, but only Lieutenant Archamus on the *Solar Son* is close enough to deter them.'

'That's only a strike cruiser, against three battleships,' said Rigantis, incredulous.

'Our presence is enough to deter them from activating warp drives, which is clearly their intent,' argued Archamus across the link.

'Only one of them needs to turn around and you'll have to back off,' the Navigator continued. He looked at Dorn, who remained silent, and then to Gidoreas. 'But I am not a Naval strategist. How can I be of assistance?'

'If the Damareen ships enter the warp, will you be able to follow?'

Rigantis snorted. ‘You should know well enough that it is near impossible for–’

‘*Near* impossible,’ rumbled Dorn, his interjection calm but so forceful that Rigantis felt as though he had been winded by a blow to the chest. He took deep breaths while the primarch continued. ‘What conditions would you need to maximise the *Phalanx*’s ability to follow the Damareen?’

‘I’ve never really considered it, lord primarch.’

Gidoreas stepped closer, his voice low.

‘If the Damareen are heading to a base or world, and we can follow them, that would give us a distinct advantage. Yes?’

‘I see.’ Rigantis chewed his lip for a few seconds as he thought about the problem. ‘Of course, it is possible to sight and maintain rough station in the warp with another vessel. We attempt it as a matter of routine with friendly ships. It’s almost unheard of for opposing ships to enter the warp in sufficiently close proximity, the danger of the translations creating a devastating gravimetric dissonance are too high.’

‘Think faster, Novator,’ said Dorn, casting his eye towards the hololithic projections. ‘Our time is limited. What is the solution?’

‘Right, right.’ Rigantis’ fingers tapped together as he tried to get ahead of his own thought process. ‘Yes! I have it! Without promising anything–’

‘Understood,’ said Dorn.

‘–if you placed the *Phalanx* and three other vessels into the warp ahead of their translation and in a surrounding position, as we reckon it in realspace, obviously, as there are no actual spatial relationships in warp space, perhaps ahead of their jump by half an hour, to ensure our warpwash has cleared the locale, one of the Navigators might observe the enemy’s initial entry and course.’

‘Good.’ Dorn turned to the projections of the ship commanders. ‘Seventy-five minutes. Delay and interfere

with the Damareen departure–’

‘Lord Dorn!’ Rigantis stepped closer, against his better instincts, to attract the primarch’s attention. The gaze of Dorn swung back onto him with the intensity of a searchlight. ‘If we fail to see the ships, or they make a significant course adjustment once underway, we will lose the opportunity. If they are heading for reinforcements, would it not be better to stop them translating at all?’

‘That was my default command, but I wanted to see if an alternative was viable.’

‘Viable seems a strong word for a gambit, Lord Dorn.’

‘One I am willing to use at this moment.’ The primarch turned away from Rigantis and continued with the hololith. ‘Rarely will we have opportunity to catch our enemies unawares while we crawl through this warp-night. Today we have that opportunity, and if we are successful, it might shorten the war considerably. Commanders, I need you to buy me seventy-five minutes to move the *Phalanx* and others ships out to the system boundary. I do not want you to lose a ship, but anything short of that is acceptable.’

The Imperial Navy commodore looked uncertain, but the three Space Marines nodded their acknowledgement.

‘Commodore Rossi, the *Valiant Prosecutor* is our largest-mass vessel in that battlezone,’ Dorn told the reluctant commander. ‘If the Damareen see our vessels leaving the system they may choose not to jump, so I need you to commit to the attack and ensure they have something close at hand to encourage them to leave rather than turn back to fight. By this action, you will bring closer the Imperium’s dominion of the Occluda Noctis.’

‘I swear we shall not fail you, Lord Dorn,’ said Rossi, visibly fortified by the primarch’s words.

‘You will not. Novator Zuma, I will shortly supply you with a list of vessels in position to contribute to this manoeuvre. Please contact your counterparts on those ships and brief them on the plan. Delays will embolden the Damareen

resistance to our arrival. Every ship must be at the translation point within thirty minutes. If all goes as I expect, this war could be over in a matter of days, but we have only this one opportunity.'

The last three days tracking the Damareen through the warp – as Rigantis had experienced time – had not been as difficult as he had foreseen, though there had been some fraught moments. It had actually been his great-nephew aboard the *Intimate Retribution* that had spied the warpwash of the Damareen as they had entered the warp, quickly relaying this to the *Phalanx* and its small flotilla. Following the Damareen had been hard, but fortunately their transit had been short. Had they travelled further the chances of losing them would have increased dramatically.

Still within the warp, Rigantis studied the translation echo left by the last Damareen ship jumping into realspace at their destination. Ahead the empyrean resolved in his thoughts as an ever-shifting prismatic mass that swelled like a cresting wave, and the stars of the other vessels' departure were dancing will-o'-wisps on the edge of awareness. Their silvery wake diminished quickly, but Rigantis logged the relative bearing and other factors into the piloting system for later reference.

As he activated the comms system that connected him directly to Rogal Dorn, Rigantis closed his warp eye and let out a long breath. The primarch's plan had been bold, but not as much of a throw of the dice as Rigantis had first thought. Every day, he learned more about the warp and his own powers, Dorn's ambitions forcing the Novator and his kin to improvise and evolve in the absence of the Astronomican. It was clear why Rogal Dorn had recruited only the best Navigators. Some commanders might have thought the Night Zone rendered Navigators useless, but the Imperial Fists' primarch had pushed the other way and Rigantis felt pride at meeting the challenges so far. At the

end of the campaign, whatever boons came the way of House Zuma would have been hard-earned.

Near-constant surveillance of the enemy fleet through the warp had taxed Rigantis' endurance both mentally and psychically. It was just a small taste of what was to come as they moved further into the Occluda Noctis and the Astronomican diminished even more.

'Lord primarch, the Damareen have translated,' he announced when he heard the connection tone.

'Excellent. I shall message the fleet to ready for translation to realspace.'

'I would not do that just yet, lord primarch. As I reported after the first day of pursuit, the behaviour of the Damareen suggests this is an unpiloted jump. There were no subtle course adjustments or trim manoeuvres that would suggest the presence of Navigators, or some similar role or system. Their mechanical predictability is one of the reasons we have been able to follow with any hope of success. This break in the journey could be predetermined, a dip out of the warp for the Damareen to recalculate their realspace position, adjust trajectory and then translate again. If we drop out of the warp now, we would be on the wrong side of the veil to mark their re-entry. If their jump routes are pre-sequenced, and they have cogitators capable of coordinating the spatial recognition to determine their location, their assessment should take no more than twenty minutes. As experienced by the Damareen.'

'I see.' Rigantis could see nothing of the primarch, but those two short words conveyed a lot of expression. There was a pause of two or three seconds before Rogal Dorn continued. *'If we remain too long before following, we may jump into a waiting enemy on heightened alert. I cannot see what you see, Novator, so I must rely upon your judgement. Do you think this is a Damareen system?'*

Rigantis opened his third eye and looked out of the dome of the pilaster, gauging the local flow. Every Navigator saw

the warp slightly differently, and conventions varied from House to House due to cultural expectations. To Rigantis, the warp was like a pool of oil, for the most part unmoving and dark. Here and there a slight flow shimmered like the rainbow of light on the oil, and stars as though reflected from realspace showed a topography of rises and falls, in some places deep trenches and in others high, jagged walls. It was across and through this landscape that he was able to guide a ship, moving down the slopes to build momentum for the climbs. There was little movement around him, an eddy building around the translation point of the Damareen, crosswise to a broader spiral that indicated an inhabited system whose population was numerous or psychic enough to leave an imprint through the veil.

The Zuma Novator made a quick calculation with the hororical astrometer, a complex four-way abacus-like device beside his Navigational throne.

'I think it is, but we will know in an hour, at most, lord primarch,' he ventured into the silence of the communicator, resting his warp eye once more.

'I understand. The purpose of this mission is to find a vulnerability of the Damareen to exploit. We shall hold position and translate in sixty minutes.'

The link ended abruptly, but Rigantis' confidence was increasing. He gave their vicinity one last look for abnormalities, swinging the throne full about as he surveyed the scene, and saw in the distance the faintest wakes of the other ships in the flotilla. It was impossible to see the vessels themselves. By nature of their Geller fields, they were literally in realspace not the warp, albeit in relatively small bubbles of the stuff. But as those bubbles crossed streams and rode waves of warp space, they left faint but unmistakable traces.

Satisfied that all was well, Rigantis unstrapped himself and strolled around the uppermost chamber of the pilaster,

activating his music box as he passed, easing the ache of long sitting from his not-quite-human bones and joints.

Listening to string and percussion arrangements by the precocious child-composer Elinor Herglitax-Wessom, he circled the chamber and lost himself in the music, at times stopping to lift his hands as though a conductor, other times quite swept away by a rising theme, staring out into the warp as the music cast undulating shadows into the immaterium and the unreflection of stars danced along.

After fifty-three minutes the music stopped with a final crescendo of violata and Jovian thunderdrums. Still humming the main refrain, Rigantis sat down, checked his instruments and strapped himself into the throne. No more than thirty seconds later, the intervox buzzed and the voice of Rogal Dorn broke the still.

'Sixty minutes, Novator Zuma,' he rasped.

'No sign of Damareen warp translation, lord primarch. The fleet should get under way.'

'Indeed, Novator Zuma, the Phalanx *shall take the lead.'*

'Of course, lord primarch.'

Rigantis cut off the link and applied himself to the runepad that would send a sequence of orders down into the warp engine halls and the main Navigational suite on the strategium. There would be a delay of between forty and sixty seconds, but he had already compensated for that. Warp manoeuvres were much more like those of a ship under sail than one with engines, Navigators predicting the most useful moment to change heading in advance of a squall of wind or surge of wave.

When they were in position, his hand moved to the main rune, signalling the warp engines to disengage, dropping them back through the veil into realspace.

'On your command, lord primarch.'

'You have it, Novator.'

Rigantis pressed the rune with a fingertip. Throughout the ship, warning servitors and sirens announced the imminent

manoeuvre. The Novator's hand moved to the handle on the left of the throne, his long fingers wrapping around the braking lever to release its movement. He felt a moment of serenity, basking in the last view of the warp, and then pushed the handle fully forwards.

The warp engine expanded with a roar and a burst of immaterial flames that leapt up around the immense mass of the *Phalanx*, all of it easily viewed from the vantage of the pilaster amidships. The warp shutters were closed, of course, but had any human in the decks below ventured to look out of a window, they likely would have seen nothing but white light. To Rigantis, the oil slick of the warp frothed as though parted by a great power, eddies churning back towards the bow of the fortress-like starship as the impossible motion of warp travel met the physics of inertia and gravity, even here at the very edge of the target star system. For some Navigators, translation felt like rising or slipping or disintegrating, but Rigantis always felt his stomach lurch as though dropping into an abyss. The mass of the *Phalanx* gave him terrible pains in his gut for several seconds as it plunged out of unreality.

With a last flicker of multicoloured lightning wreathing its hull, the *Phalanx* tore the veil and appeared in realspace, Geller field expanding into a sphere of half-seen sparks and then evaporating altogether as the inner and outer worlds of reality merged again.

Rigantis had closed his third eye at the last moment to avoid any risk of translation blindness, and with very human eyes – though the purple irises were another sign of his mutated genetics – he surveyed the new system.

A pale star, not much more than a blob a little larger than the others at this distance. No nearby orbital bodies, which accounted for the relatively smooth translation. Several dozen sparks moving in formation were starship drives thousands of kilometres away. Most importantly they were heading in-system, apparently unaware of their Imperial

pursuers.

Rigantis hummed a few more bars of the orchestral piece, fingers wagging in time, and then touched the intervox activation.

‘We have arrived.’ He glanced over his shoulder and saw flashes that denoted other ships breaking warp behind them. ‘The others are also translating without issue. I have delivered the fleet. Over to you, lord primarch.’

Sigismund looked over to the other side of the drop pod, where Heldar sat with his chainsword across his knees, a portable drill-stylus in one hand as he carved letters into the body of the weapon. Sigismund read the cursive script upside down.

Justi…

‘A name or a promise?’ Sigismund asked.

Heldar didn’t look up from his work, the glint of sparks from the tool reflected in his helm’s eye-lenses.

‘A motto,’ the other Templar grunted back.

‘You’re not going to have time to finish,’ warned Sergeant Hauk. ‘Twenty seconds until retros.’

Heldar grunted again and, after continuing for a few more seconds, stowed the stylus in a pouch at his waist.

‘These Damareen won’t put up much of a fight when they see a hundred drop pods landing on their heads. I’ll finish it later.’

Sigismund watched the countdown in his helm display, waiting for the drop pod’s systems to detect the distance to landing and automatically fire.

The number in his eyeline went two seconds into the negative before he felt the spine-compressing thrust of the landing retros. Metal shook and creaked but his harness kept him as still as a cloudless night, the roar of the jets lost in the scream of air rushing past the plummeting capsule.

Sergeant Hauk raised a fist.

‘To victory, brothers!’ he shouted over the increasing din. ‘For the Emperor!’

‘Victory and the Emperor!’ the others roared back.

A final burst of deceleration shuddered through Sigismund as the last of the retardant engines fired just before touchdown. They hit the ground hard, the timing sequence off by just a fraction but enough to see them make planetfall faster than planned.

‘Shit!’ bellowed Heldar as the drop pod toppled, pitching forward and to Sigismund’s left. It almost fell over but, detecting that they were down, the securing bolts fired and pneumatics screeched into life, throwing the ramps open. Their sudden impact on the ground violently righted the drop pod, although Sigismund could feel that they were at an angle – a slope of about thirty degrees.

‘Out!’ ordered Hauk, his harness flicking up and out of the way.

Outside it was night-time, the darkness filled with the screaming of jets soon joined by the unmistakable bark and crash of bolters firing.

Sigismund was up off the bench, but Heldar shouldered in front of him, following the sergeant down the ramp. The rest of the squad thudded down the ramps in other directions, forming an immediate perimeter.

Sigismund’s foot sank almost to the ankle as he bounded off the ramp. The pod had landed on a grassy mound, the ground underfoot boggy. Mulch puckered from his boot as he pushed forward, the suction no hindrance to his powered plate.

‘Where are we?’ grunted Heldar.

Their target coordinates had been at the heart of the largest city, but all Sigismund could see was grassland and woods. Only when his auto-senses adjusted did he see the dim shape of tall buildings beyond the woods.

‘Parklands,’ said Hauk. ‘With me.’

Ahead the woods were alight in places, ignited by the

impact of drop pods. In starlight and flickering flame, the Templars moved together, uniting around Aeolus and his squad where the trees gave way to a broad border between woods and an enclosing wall. Beyond the brickwork, Sigismund saw a large building pierced with many dark windows, approached by a broad black driveway through the park, flanked by gilded statues as it neared the building. Other Imperial Fists forces were moving in from different directions, converging on the government palace.

There was no light except for the flames and the stars – a blackout in response to the arrival of the *Phalanx* and its companions. Through his armour's auto-senses, Sigismund could see heat signatures inside the building and on the roof. The Damareen. The night would not protect them.

Bursts of fire met the Templars as they forged through a gateway onto the road. At a command from Aeolus, they moved quickly from the straight ribbon of black into the foliage on the left flank. Yellow-armoured Imperial Fists advanced through the trees and bushes on the opposite side, and more approached from the rear of the palace. Gunships streaked overhead, missiles and cannons thundering as they circled the objective, turning the roof to a pyre, raking wounds in the masonry of the four storeys of the main block.

Rockets and tracers streaked out to give the Imperial Fists a hot welcome. Counter-fire sprang up from legionary squads taking position around the building, the chatter and discharge smell of autocannon rounds and the hiss of lascannon beams added to the echoing crack of Damareen bullets and the scent of night-blooms in a nearby hedgerow.

'This place was never raised for defence,' grumbled Ardrik. 'Too much cover for us. No lines of sight for the defenders at all.'

Sigismund considered this as they forged through a thicket of waist-high thorned bushes, their sharp stems blunted by thick ceramite, trampled underfoot by the

passage of the squad.

‘Then they must be even bigger idiots to start a war,’ declared Heldar.

‘Our warp trick has caught them unawares,’ replied Hauk. ‘Lord Dorn saw the opening and struck without hesitation. We have to carry that speed now. The foe need to be dead before they see the blade swinging.’

Fresh volleys of fire snarled from the lower floors as the Templars and others reached the edge of the parkland and came to the open ground between it and the government palace.

‘Not totally unprepared,’ muttered Sigismund.

‘Remember your orders!’ Sigismund felt a jolt of energy surge through his body at the sound of Dorn’s voice. *‘Create a cordon and contain the foe. We have come here to force their capitulation, not wipe them out. There will be nobody left to surrender if we kill all of their leaders.’*

Tactical and support squads took up firing positions while the Templars held their ground, ready to move forward in assault or counter-attack. Fire from the upper storeys raked down, high-calibre bullets sparking from armour and ripping up plascrete roadway.

‘What are we just standing here for?’ growled Heldar. He raised his bolt pistol and fired back, but at that range the bolt was almost out of fuel by the time it reached its target, exploding ineffectively.

‘Assault units, move forward and breach!’ Rogal Dorn issued the command from the fore of his Huscarls, who were headed directly for the main entrance. *‘It is time to bring our blade to the throat of the foe and force their decision.’*

The Templars sprinted forward, chainswords roaring, to pass between the breacher and tactical squads ahead. The windows of the ground floor were narrow but low, broken by fire from the Imperial Fists, their frames and surrounding walls shredded by bolt impacts. Barely

anything moved within sight.

'Heavy weapon!'

Sigismund wasn't sure who shouted the warning, but he located the threat an instant later. A missile streaked from a second-storey window, heading straight for him.

Something heavy hit him in the shoulder, pushing him from the path of the projectile. His auto-senses blanked as the warhead detonated, his armour crackling as shrapnel sprayed across it.

Sigismund rolled as he hit the ground, coming back to his feet in one fluid motion. A dozen bolts were already screaming back through the window, turning the rocketeer into bone shards and bloody paste.

Sigismund noticed the dark mass on the ground next to him was an armoured figure. Heldar. Half his helm and skull had been blown away by the rocket as he had pushed Sigismund aside. Even for a legionary the injury was too much.

The others were still moving forward, pushing home the assault. He turned to follow but as he did so, Sigismund's eye passed over Heldar's chainsword, still in his grip. The bare metal of the incompletely scribed motto caught the light of bolts and fire.

Justice for

Justice for whom? Sigismund wondered. All? A lost brother? The Emperor?

Such thoughts were for another time. Dorn and his Huscarls were at the entrance of the building, setting charges on the door, while the Templars were already charging through the ground-floor windows. Sigismund heard the snarl of chainswords and the cries of his brothers and felt a pang of guilt at his tardiness. Breaking into a sprint he sped towards the foe, not wishing to miss a second more of the battle.

For the second time in a day, Gidoreas followed his lord

primarch over the threshold of the Consensus Hall, ninety-nine more Imperial Fists Huscarls with him. There were no banners or fanfares. The squadron of Stormbirds that had deposited the primarch's entourage accelerated away to take up patrols over the city, watchful for any deception by the Damareen.

The building was austere by the standards Gidoreas had seen over the decades. A drab, dark grey ferrocrete-equivalent construction without columns or porchway, just wide steps leading to the ruin of the doors that had barred their entry the night before. Narrow, tall windows with shattered glass let a meagre light into the foyer within, where a contingent of thirty scarlet-uniformed guards awaited. Unarmed, Gidoreas noted. Their leader, plumed helmet under arm, snapped her heels together and lifted her right fist to the left shoulder in salute. There was anger in her gaze despite the show of respect, though her eyes moved over the ranks of the Imperial Fists but never in the direction of the primarch. Defiance in the presence of Rogal Dorn was impossible.

Gidoreas broke from the Huscarls to approach the officer. He introduced himself, keeping his tone as soft as the external address speaker allowed.

'I am Alexa Sovernia, colonel of the Inner Guard,' she replied. 'As declared in the terms of the surrender, there are no weapons in the Consensus Hall. My soldiers continue their duty of protection all the same.'

'Admirable, had things gone differently I am sure you would have died bravely defending this place,' said Gidoreas. He noted a flush of blood to the colonel's face and increased heart rate. He couldn't tell if it was anger or fear. 'That was a compliment, not a threat.'

'I… Our ships brought recordings of your butchery at Thanad.' Her mouth was a thin line, the words forced out through gritted teeth. From what intelligence had been gathered, Gidoreas assumed Thanad was the first system

where they had encountered the Damareen. The Imperial victory had not been as surgical as here, on Codath. ‘I had a family there.’

‘They are likely still alive,’ said Gidoreas. ‘Our latest communications with our people there said that up to ninety per cent of your armed forces were surrendering and we do not harm civilian populations out of hand. Our “butchery”, as you call it, was necessary to focus the thoughts of your leaders there and on other Damareen worlds. You should not feel defeated or ashamed. Your people have accepted the truth of a greater power and will benefit greatly.’

The Huscarl commander became aware of his primarch’s attention, a prickling on the nape of the neck that he did not need to confirm with a look.

‘Please announce us to your leaders for the formal acceptance of compliance.’

She nodded and Gidoreas returned to his place in the Huscarls. A shouted order brought the Damareen soldiery to attention. Colonel Sovernia stepped sharply to the plain doors at the other side of the wide foyer. Although it lacked ostentation, there was still a grand quality to the scale of the hall and the doors were just about sufficient for the primarch to enter without stooping.

‘They are here,’ announced Sovernia. ‘The emissaries of the Emperor of Terra.’

Rogal Dorn and his escort continued across the entrance hall. As he passed under the doorway, Rogal Dorn spoke quietly to the colonel.

‘He is the Emperor of Mankind,’ he reminded her. ‘Please remember that in future.’

Gidoreas noticed her trembling from this gentlest of rebukes as he passed, followed by a squad of ten Huscarls in hulking Cataphractii armour. If the Damareen harboured any thoughts of ambush or hostage-taking, the *Phalanx* was locked on to the suit signals of the squad and the primarch,

ready for immediate teleportation. Lord Dorn had insisted on the precaution, for the sake of avoiding more Damareen deaths rather than his own protection.

The hall was an oval chamber about seventy metres long and thirty across, with semicircular rows of benches to the left and right, and a dais with a long table facing the doors between them. Thick carpet underfoot muffled the tread of war plate as the contingent entered.

There was room for at least five hundred delegates but only a handful were present, standing behind the table. A flight of low steps swept up to their dais, which Dorn took four at a time, stopping about halfway so that his head was level with those at the top.

There were three women and two men, garbed in formal attire, each wearing a different coloured sash from left shoulder to right hip, affixed with an identical broach that partly resembled a beetle and partly a stylised sun. All were of advanced years but appeared in good health, marginally shorter than the galactic average that Gidoreas had observed. The woman at the centre had a slender rod in a holder on the table in front of her and wore a silver chain about her forehead with a red stone set into a smaller version of the device on her sash.

‘Tidit Kahinna, I am Rogal Dorn, primarch of the Emperor of Mankind, commander of the Seventh Legion Astartes.’

‘How does this work?’ asked Kahinna, glancing at her co-rulers. ‘We have a quorum of councillors given authority to speak on behalf of the Consensus Directive as a whole. Our surrender has already been issued and accepted.’

‘It’s a bloody victory parade, is what it is,’ growled a woman to Kahinna’s left. ‘Our new lord’s come to show us who’s in charge.’

‘An understandable error,’ said Rogal Dorn. ‘By your own words, the surrender of the Damareen Consensus is complete, across all six of your worlds. Surrender is not the same as accepting compliance. This is a formality, but an

important one. I am not your lord, nobody is taking control. Not in substance. On behalf of your people, you will swear oaths of allegiance and service to the Emperor of Mankind. Already, soldiers of the Imperial Army are moving to support your military forces in a transition to Imperial service. Iterators of the Emperor will arrive with them, to assess your cultural norms and to educate on the Imperial Truth where needed.'

'Still sounds like an occupation,' continued the woman.

'You will remain in your current offices. Your administrative class will be supplemented with agents from Terra to align your bureaucratic systems with those of the Imperium. Your internal politics and traditions will be largely unaffected.'

'So what is the point?' asked Kahinna. 'Why come at all? Why attack us?'

'We did not attack, we came with messages of integration and peaceful accord.' The primarch's tone had a sharper edge to it, and the councillors flinched.

After the bloodbath on Scathia, Dorn appeared sensitive to the accusation of warmongering. It seemed a trivial matter to the Huscarl, but it was not his place to judge his commander, and he recalled his lord's speech after the first encounter with the Damareen. They came not as slayers or slavers, but liberators from darkness.

'Your people have done well to survive the darkness, but six worlds is nothing when set against the threats that beset our galaxy,' the primarch continued. 'Only by chance have you endured where stronger, larger civilisations have failed, but the Emperor has seen that there will be sterner tests to come. Only united can humanity hope to prevail.'

'So you came here to kill us because you want to protect us?' Kahinna asked with a raised eyebrow.

Gidoreas gave the chamber a quick scan, alert. It was good that Lord Dorn had a patience to match his physique and intellect. The last token resistance was always the

same. Resignation to the inevitable but argument for the benefit of ego, trying to wrest some moral authority away from the Emperor's crusade.

'Our mission is to expand the Imperium to all worlds of humankind, yours included. We will protect those that carry the message of the Emperor and remove those that refuse it. Far too long the galaxy has been a storm of barbarism and superstition. Alien species look to enslave or destroy humans wherever they are found. Only in complete union can we leave behind Old Night and a new era of enlightenment arrive.' Dorn took a step but leaned forward as he did so, not quite a bow but enough to keep him level with those he addressed rather than towering over them. 'It is time to stop being afraid and embrace the future.'

'I have a question,' said a white-haired man at the leftmost end of the table, his sash purple, the cut of his clothes as severe as the architecture around the hall. 'If we were to refuse now, what would happen?'

'Nothing, unless you attack the servants of the Emperor,' said the primarch. Gidoreas watched the councillors carefully, in case they were considering some kind of reversal and ambush. They looked worried more than defiant and the primarch could see the same. Dorn sighed, the first sign of impatience. His next words were again addressed to Kahinna. 'Compliance must always be voluntary, even if it is simply to avoid bloodshed. If you refuse, I expect those that nominated you to replace you with a group willing to accept on their behalf.'

Kahinna did not reply for some time, one hand moving to the rod of office in front of her. Slowly, she looked up at Dorn and nodded.

Her eyes moved away from the primarch, passing briefly over Gidoreas and the Cataphractii. The Master of the Huscarls took out the copy of the articles of compliance from a messenger case mag-locked to his left forearm. He ascended the steps, past his primarch, and unrolled the

document on the table in front of Kahinna. The Damareen representatives withdrew from his presence, not so much stepping back as inclining themselves away like reeds bending in a wind. They were afraid. The sooner the primarch and the Legion were gone, and the Damareen were left with Terran-standard humans, the quicker they would forget the horror of their brief war.

'We are ready,' said Kahinna, reaching for the declaration. She quickly looked at the text, nodding slightly as though her expectations were confirmed.

Gidoreas withdrew down the steps, leaving his primarch to personally accept the compliance of yet another human world.

'It is a means for you to personally record your thoughts on these historic events, minister. Yes, it is already aurally transcribing. No, I'll just say a few words of introduction and then we'll begin.

'I am with External Affairs Minister Darius Gelkhor, one of the team of representatives from the Triumvirate of Garl. Along with his peers we are aboard a shuttle from Primeworld, capital of the Triumvirate, destined to dock at the Phalanx *for the official act of compliance.*

'Minister Gelkhor, your worlds immediately agreed to compliance with the Imperium. What was your reasoning for such a swift response?'

'For some time, we had been intercepting interstellar transmissions that spoke of the rise of a new Empire of Humanity under the rule of a Terran Emperor. They called for all worlds of human occupation to continue to hold strong against the nightmares of Old Night. Help was coming, they said. The Triumvirate was formed for mutual protection, clustering around the Garl Primeworld beacon. The thought that we were not alone, that other pockets of humanity had survived as long as we had, filled us with hope.

‘But that dwindled. A year passed. Another. Nearly eighteen times Primeworld has orbited Garl since those first messages. The beacon detected the presence of starships in the warp sixteen years ago, but they faded. Now and then it would pick up something. We feared it would be raiders or invaders, and wished it was allies. Neither, it seemed. Just ghosts, the wash of ancient travels still flowing through the world of the otherspace.

‘Less than half a year ago the beacon started going wild, sensing fleets massing and dispersing, just a few hundred light years away. Some said to prepare for war. Others said it was the arrival of the Imperium we had been awaiting.

‘We prepared for war but hoped for peace. When your vessel warp-jumped to Garl, we thought it aliens at first, but the swift overtures of peace and enlightenment were so reminiscent of those first messages we knew that it couldn’t be subterfuge.

‘So many centuries, countless generations since the Greater Republic failed, and the Second Republic after it. World after world, beacon after beacon falling silent. We thought we were alone for the longest time. We came so close to disaster. Cults that thought we were dead and had passed the veil into afterlife, which would have turned our world into a mass pyre. Civil war. Disease. The failure of our technology.

‘The Triumvirate gave us enough strength to go on these last seven hundred years.

‘Waiting for this moment. To be united with the rest of humanity again.’

‘Obviously an emotional time, minister. I will leave you to wipe your tears in a moment, but beg that you answer one more question.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘What is your greatest hope now?’

‘Now? Now, I hope that one day I might meet our new Emperor and thank Him.’

‘That is a magnificent sentiment, thank you, Minister Darius Gelkhor.

‘I should add that the addition of the Triumvirate of Garl is an uplifting punctuation mark to the end of the first year of the Night Crusade. It has been a time of peaks and dips, with military action, hardship and loss, but also success and renewed hope for billions of humans. When I left Orbitus Commenca, I did not realise such depth and scope of experience could be possible within just a single Solar orbit. Bloody extermination to voluntary compliance and all between. And yet I believe I have not yet seen a tenth of all the Great Crusade encapsulates.

‘Even as we bring hope and security to more and more systems, just two days ago we received news that bolstered the heart of all in the Seventh Legion’s expedition. Another of the Emperor’s sons has been found, on the world of Olympia. Rogal Dorn shared with us the message of welcome and fraternal bond that he has sent to this newly discovered primarch. A bond, I am sure, that will get stronger and stronger as the Imperium continues to grow.’

The pull of artificial gravity dragged stronger as the conveyor cage accelerated away from the lower docks of the *Phalanx*. Gidoreas regarded his companion with a degree of circumspection. Koragga Taudo of the Luna Wolves was only a lieutenant by rank, but he carried with him the full authority of a primarch. Shorter than Gidoreas by a small margin, made more prominent by the bulk of the Huscarl’s Terminator armour, Taudo nevertheless carried himself with the gait of a man who was taller than any other around, regarding the Imperial Fists captain down the length of a flattened, brutish nose. His right eye was a thing of metal and ceramic, lifeless as it stared at Gidoreas without blinking; a finger-long scar cut across brow and cheek above and below the artificial organ. Terran, Gidoreas assumed by his companion’s name and general

countenance. A veteran by that fact and the scars he bore.

'You have come into the unlit depths, lieutenant. How many other heralds have been despatched to look for us?' Gidoreas asked casually while the conveyor clanked its way up the thirteen decks to the main strategium of the *Phalanx*.

'I was one of six,' he grunted back. Gidoreas chose not to mention Taudo's lack of manners in not addressing him by rank. Despite Taudo's obvious belligerence, the Huscarl respected the Luna Wolf. He had the air of a survivor about him.

'And you are the first, perhaps only one to reach us. Commendable determination. How did you do it?'

A lopsided smile changed Taudo's entire complexion.

'I just had to follow the corpse-stink.'

'I can see how that would work.'

The conveyor rattled to an abrupt halt and Gidoreas addressed himself to the vocal lock on the controls. The doors rumbled open to reveal the upper strategium antechamber. Five of his brethren from the Huscarls guarded the doors opposite, clad in burnished Terminator armour. The conveyor doors clanged shut behind them, filling the chamber with noise for a second.

'Lord Dorn is within,' announced one of the Terminators, Gabrian, activating the strategium door controls.

Gidoreas led the way, down three flights of steps to the observation dais. For the first two flights Taudo looked around, his one good eye roaming across the decks and stations without pause. On the third flight his gaze was drawn to a single point – the gold-clad giant awaiting them below.

Rogal Dorn was with Novator Zuma and several of the lesser Navigators, as well as a clutch of command staff watching a tri-D of the surrounding star systems. Progress had been inconsistent but nearly a score more worlds had been brought into the Imperium – some more easily than

others – as well as two systems that had been prepared for habitation many thousands of years before but never settled.

Gidoreas stopped at the bottom of the steps. Taudo made to march past, but the Huscarl stopped him with a hand on his arm. ‘The primarch has not acknowledged us.’

‘The Triumvirate charts are not very precise, at least a thousand years out of date, but they do stretch nearly two hundred light years towards the Occluda Noctis core systems,’ Zuma told the primarch and others. There was something about the senior Navigator’s movements that set Gidoreas on edge. Stiff, unnatural gestures that reminded him more of xenos than human. ‘We are making calculations to update the information with readings we have gathered.’

‘This is a treasure trove,’ declared Lithel Odasan, one of Zuma’s subordinates. She rubbed together her fingertips as though she could sift the data between them. ‘One short jump to check alignment and then we can perhaps travel twenty or thirty light years with each transition.’

‘With the Triumvirate astrographers we have identified at least a score of systems that once belonged to the Greater Republic,’ Zuma added. ‘Survey ships are being readied to chart the nearby warp space environs so that we can prepare transition routes to these targets.’

‘That would bypass systems,’ said Dorn, like a statue suddenly coming to life. His armoured hand swept over the hololith plate like a plague devouring stars. ‘A thousand years is a long time. Whole civilisations, human or xenos, can rise and fall in that time. We will continue as we are with reinforced pioneer flotillas investigating each system that matches the criteria I have laid down.’

Odasan grumbled something and shook her head.

‘Speak your objections, Navigator,’ said Dorn.

‘Only one in fifty systems has any chance of containing sentient life, my lord, perhaps fewer.’ The Navigator

gripped the lapels of her long coat and started to pace, as though addressing a symposium back on Terra. ‘We should use what intelligence we can gather to focus our search more prudently. Having established a presence and hopefully compliance in the most likely systems, we can use them as bases from which to investigate less fruitful areas.’

She stopped, suddenly realising her manner bordered on insulting.

‘I’m sure my lord has considered such an option, of course,’ Odasan added quickly, withdrawing physically from the primarch, head bowed.

Dorn’s expression was thoughtful.

‘I had considered and dismissed that approach, but, in light of your work to help us better direct our attention, I am willing to reconsider it.’ The primarch looked over to Gidoreas and Taudo, the faintest trace of a frown marring his expression. ‘I believe some time may need to be spent in consolidation if our visitor bears the news I think he does.’

‘You’re up,’ Gidoreas murmured to the Luna Wolf, who gave the Huscarl a sidelong glance and then approached a few paces.

‘Lord Dorn, I have brought the latest campaign movements from my primarch and others, and I’m here to ask that you provide the same in return.’

‘Is that all? That seems a low profit for such a hazardous venture. I expected an invite to a fresh conclave, so that we can assess our progress and determine whether the current courses of action best fulfil our objectives.’

‘That was the next part,’ said Taudo, surprised. ‘Horus has nominated a star system that would make a suitable rendezvous and asks that you meet him there. At your convenience, of course.’

‘It’s never convenient to abandon a campaign unfinished.’

‘Horus wanted me to–’

‘Nevertheless, I can’t rule out some development or dis-

covery that may change our thinking. Given the difficulties we have navigating back to the periphery, how long do you think it will take to reach this rendezvous?'

'Three or four weeks, Lord Dorn.' Taudo glanced around the massive strategium. 'Assuming the *Phalanx* warp travels about the same speed as a battleship.'

'That won't be necessary, the *Phalanx* will be staying here as central command. I will take the *Herald of Dawn*, to minimise disruption and delay to the Legion's advance.'

Gidoreas stepped up, fist banging to his chestplate.

'I will begin the preparations for the Huscarls to move to the *Herald of Dawn*. What other orders do you have, my lord?'

'Have Aeolus lead a detachment of Templars to join us. My brothers will have their champions with them, I should have some of mine.'

The spectacle of the parading legionaries and the commencement speech of Horus had ended, the entourages of the primarchs sent back to separate garrisons while the champions and captains accompanied their lords to the council. It was clear that the gene-father of the Luna Wolves had wanted to emulate, on a far lesser scale, the pomp and importance of the Solar Conclave. Just over one Terran year on from that auspicious gathering, it struck Gidoreas as somewhat premature to be counting victories. It was particularly irksome to do so while knowing that navigating back to the rest of the Legion heading towards the heart of the Occluda Noctis would take even more time and effort than coming out. Gidoreas had every confidence that his battle-brothers and their allies could continue the campaign, but always there was the nagging knowledge of the four lost expeditions. What if the cause of those calamities emerged while the primarch was absent?

Evidently Lord Dorn felt similarly. Several times his patience wore thin and he pressed his brothers to quicken

their recounting of past endeavours to talk about the future. It was clear that Fulgrim, Horus and the Lion had each brought more star systems into compliance than the VII – in the case of the Dark Angels nearly twice as many, made possible by fresh recruits and supplies from Caliban. While regaling the assembly with an account of the fall of a system renamed Liberata Majoris, the Lion espoused the virtue of his chosen approach.

'As you keep heckling for us to proceed to the matter of strategising, Rogal, perhaps now you would be willing to accept that the premise of your previous argument was flawed.' He stood and leaned across the broad table that separated the Legion commanders, its surface covered by an immense map of the Occluda Noctis. The Lion's hand moved across swathes of stars at the outer limits and then to the thick but short wedge of systems that had fallen to Dorn. 'The evidence is plain to all eyes present.'

Gidoreas' gaze swept over the other attendants, meeting the eyes of some. Sejanus' brow furrowed a little at the Lion's remarks while Keyshen was flexing his gauntleted fingers, thoughts far distant. Eidolon barely registered the Huscarl, eyes never leaving the Lion, full lips pursed in contemplation. Gidoreas felt a few of his fellow Seventh stirring, the beginnings of complaint rumbling in their chests.

'You have castles on Caliban, I believe?' Dorn replied quietly, cutting off any retort from his gene-sons.

'Many, with the citadel of Aldurukh, our fortress, one of the greatest fastnesses in the Imperium, I would say.'

'And I have no doubt you have besieged and taken some number of them?'

The Lion hesitated, thinking the question a trick but unable to see it.

'I fought in many sieges, on both sides of the wall. Even more enemy strongholds have fallen to me since the Emperor lifted me from Caliban.'

‘And in all of those campaigns, when you had the castle surrounded, the environs secured or pillaged, that’s when you counted victory. Am I right?’

‘Of course not!’ The Lion’s mane of hair fell about his shoulders as he shook his head. ‘A fortress is only undone once the attacker is inside and never a second earlier.’

‘Then we are in agreement.’ Dorn sat back, arms crossed.

The Lion glanced at Horus, who looked on impassively, and received only a raised eyebrow in support from Fulgrim.

‘Make plain your accusation, Rogal,’ the Lion demanded, standing with fists on the table. As he did so, the primarch looked across the map again and Gidoreas could almost see the light of understanding coming to his eyes. He jabbed a finger towards the blank centre of the map. ‘You think this a castle?’

‘I think the analogy works,’ Dorn replied evenly. ‘I would not like to engage in pedantry about it.’

The Lion rubbed his bearded chin as he regarded his brother and then turned his attention back to the map.

‘One does not charge headlong at the gates, Rogal,’ he said, lifting his gaze from the star chart. ‘One scouts. Counts the defenders and reckons the defences before formulating a plan.’

‘What if one could attack swiftly enough that the defenders have no warning, and you have a chance of finding the fortress with its gate open and unbarred? One can ride around and around the walls out of arrow range all day and not make a single pace of progress towards victory. No matter how well scouted, the wall still remains and someone must break it or scale it. It requires courage and fortitude to meet the problem swiftly and decisively.’

‘This is courage?’ growled the Lion, his finger jabbing the wedge of systems taken by the VII. ‘Stumbling from one enemy to the next and hitting whatever comes in front of you?’

‘Perhaps we should rise for–’ began Fulgrim, throwing a

look towards Horus. Lupercal shook his head, his attention moving from the Lion to Dorn and back again.

‘No, ill words are like meat on the fire. It does no good to leave them untended, for they will grow more heated and tougher to swallow, or else turn to ashes altogether.’

‘Lord Dorn,’ Gidoreas said quietly. ‘Your brother seems to be spoiling for a fight.’

The primarch turned and looked at his Huscarl captain, confusion written in his stern features.

‘You suggest that we risk the future of the campaign because one of my brothers cannot accept a counterpoint?’

Gidoreas meant a literal fight. He saw it in the faces of brothers he sent to the duelling cages to settle their differences. Honour had been pricked and there was nothing that would heal that wound except capitulation. His lord, almost bereft of that kind of pride, did not see when it was taking control of others. Before he could warn Dorn, his gene-father stood up, addressing Fulgrim and Horus as much as the Lion.

‘A year has passed since we were sent by the Emperor to claim these stars.’ He looked at the map, from one end to the other, as he continued. ‘The Seventh have not travelled as far as any of your expeditions. We have not fought as many battles. We have brought fewer worlds to compliance, by a margin. I return again, as I did when last we spoke, to the command of the Emperor. To bring His light to those systems that cannot see it. To shine enlightenment into the darkness left by Old Night. Most importantly, to vanquish the power that destroyed the previous expeditions.’

Now Dorn fixed upon the Lion, one fist clasped in the other hand as he was often posed.

‘To go forwards, that was the command. To succeed where the other expeditionary fleets had not. You retrace their steps and call it success. Look at this map and tell me, brother of Caliban, which of us has travelled the furthest from the Emperor’s light? Who among us has actually

braved the real darkness of the Occluda Noctis?’

‘Bravery is it?’ snarled the Lion, clenching a fist. ‘You think I choose an easier road?’

‘The walls of the castle will not be breached by scouting alone. What other reason have you got to excuse your reluctance?’

‘Enough, Rogal!’ snapped Horus, slamming a hand on the table.

‘No, it is not enough,’ growled the Lion. ‘It is too much! I am not only a coward, but I am also lazy, it seems. You leave out your true accusation, Rogal. That with my laxity I disobey the Emperor’s command.’

‘I’m sure that was not–’ began Fulgrim.

‘My brother sees it right,’ said Rogal Dorn, glaring at all three of the other primarchs. His stare fell on the Lion. ‘You each choose to interpret what the Emperor said to fit your plans, rather than building your plans to heed the Emperor.’

Gidoreas let no expression show on his face, but the captains of the other Legions had less reserve, some gaping at the enormity of the charge laid down by Dorn.

‘Shit,’ muttered Fulgrim.

‘The arrogance…’ The Lion stepped away from the table but then swung back. ‘No! I will not accept this without response. There is only one way to determine which of us is in the right.’

Sigismund stepped back, retreating from a determined series of thrusts by Odenza, his feet kicking up puffs of cinders from the circle that held them. He did not need to parry, letting distance defend him from the probing point of his opponent’s gladius. Sigismund spun suddenly, the momentum of withdrawal turned into attack, as he had intended from the moment of his first step of feigned retreat. His longer, heavier blade slashed towards Odenza’s thigh, forcing him to dodge sideways, the gladius coming

across for the parry, but the blow was not intended for the leg and with a slight shift of weight and direction, Sigismund's sword-edge caught the forearm of his foe, biting deep into the leather guard there, smashing the gladius from his grip.

'I yield!' Odenza barked quickly, throwing himself backward as Sigismund's questing blade tip moved towards his bare midriff.

Sigismund halted like an automaton suddenly bereft of power. A heart's beat later he stood to attention, blade raised to his forehead in salute.

Appius appeared at the edge of the cinders, clapping once to signal the bout was over and in praise of Sigismund's victory.

'You should know by now that Sigismund only moves in one direction, Odenza, and that is forwards. If he retreats it is because he has already started a counter-attack.'

'Must you tell all of my opponents my secrets?' rasped Sigismund, though the slightest kink of a smile crooked his lips.

'I'm not your personal trainer, all of the Templars must strive here to improve.'

'Sigismund!'

They turned at the sound of Aeolus' call from the door of the training chamber. The Master of Templars stood silhouetted against the brighter light from the corridor beyond.

'Get cleaned up. Our lord's honour requires my blade. You will second me.'

'I am honoured to do so, Master Aeolus.' Sigismund's response was automatic, hiding his surprise at being nominated. He was one of the most junior members of the Templar brethren and seconding the master in a duel was customarily a service performed by the more senior. He took it as a compliment.

'Appius,' continued Aeolus, 'ready my great blade and both

of you meet me at the aft launch bays.’

The master disappeared again, leaving the three Templars to gaze at each other. Sigismund made no time for speculation but returned to his dormitory and performed his ablutions as swiftly as he could. Serfs provided him with a fresh yellow bodyglove and black surcoat, the fist of the Legion symbol embroidered in white on the left breast.

When he arrived at the meeting point, he found Appius, Aeolus and Eidolon of the Emperor’s Children already there. He knew the Phoenician’s subordinate by sight and reputation, but Aeolus made the formal introduction as they moved into the gunship hangar.

‘I’ll be escorting you to the *Pride of the Emperor*,’ said Eidolon, directing them towards a slender strike craft in the purple and gold of his Legion. He saw the confusion on Sigismund’s face before he could voice it. ‘Fulgrim offered his flagship as neutral ground for the duel. Just between the three of us and the deck, I confess I think he did it simply so Horus could not!’

The craft’s interior was more elaborate than Sigismund was used to, with gilding on the hull bracing and dark-panelled lockers along the central bulkhead. The floor was simple mesh decking, but the ceiling had a pattern of inlaid marble-effect tiles, while the door to the cockpit was framed by carved faux columns and lintel.

‘Is this one of your primarch’s personal transports?’ the Templar enquired.

‘This?’ Eidolon laughed. ‘Of course not. Far too cramped for the Phoenician.’

After they had launched, Eidolon moved from his seat near the cockpit to the one next to Aeolus.

‘You’re fighting Barzareon of the First,’ he said, leaning closer. ‘A Paladin-captain. I heard one of the Dark Angels refer to him as Guard-bane.’

The Master of Templars grunted but said nothing else.

‘I’ve heard of him. Trained by the Lion himself, as a squire

of the Order and a champion of the Legion,' said Appius. 'A stern test.'

Aeolus grunted again.

'I've heard that the newest legionary of the First can wield a blade as well as an assault cadre veteran,' added Sigismund, feeling he should have some opinion on the matter.

'Enough,' growled Aeolus, and the rest of the flight passed in silence.

Sigismund was not impressed by the size of the *Pride of the Emperor*; even a Gloriana-class battleship had nothing of a scale to compare to the *Phalanx*. Yet as a child of a hovel-city on Terra and raised in the relatively austere surrounds of the VII Legion, it seemed to him that the Phoenician's flagship was as grand and opulent as the Palace of the Emperor Himself. Eidolon kept up a steady oratory to introduce and explain their surroundings as they passed through the massive starship, traversing the Triumphal Way, which ran for most of the vessel's length from the aft launch bays to the command decks near the prow, where the duel was to take place. The processional was mostly deserted having already been cleared for the arrival of the primarchs ahead of the champions' far smaller entourages. Their footsteps echoed back from gilded columns and immense arches, the glare of thousands of lumens reflecting from polished gates that could be closed against attack. Only the strategium of the *Phalanx* was bigger in Sigismund's estimation, for although the starbase massed far more than any ship of the line, its interior had for the most part been designed for humans, not primarchs. The *Pride of the Emperor* seemed scaled for Fulgrim, every doorway and vaulted ceiling far taller than needed even by a legionary.

Eventually they ascended to the place of the duel and Sigismund realised that the visiting groups had been

landed aft entirely for the purpose of being shown this grandiose tour. Not for the duellists, he reconsidered, but for Lord Dorn, the Lion and, most of all, Horus.

Rogal Dorn and his Huscarls, fifty of them, occupied one side of the grand theatre-like briefing hall, while the Lion and his elite, equal in number, sat on the benches opposite; both divided from each other by the Emperor's Children and Luna Wolves and their respective primarchs. Where there had been a hololith and various briefing machineries there was now an open space with a circle of metal cable filled ankle-deep with sand, about two dozen metres across. Large, with plenty of room to manoeuvre, but the sand would make the footing heavier and more unsteady. Sigismund had heard that the III did everything by design, and Fulgrim was a stickler for the smallest detail. It was no great assumption that the Phoenician had ordered the arena thus, to allow for movement and dynamic attack but always with a threat of misstep and disaster.

After raising his fist in salute to his commander, Sigismund immediately turned his attention to the Dark Angels champion, Barzareon. He seemed little different to any legionary of the First. Black of hair, cut to shoulder length and held back with a silvered band on the brow, a broad chin and cheeks, dark eyes. He gave the impression of constant movement, a slight swaying as he shifted subtly from one foot to the other, rolling the shoulders slightly, twisting the wrists, flexing the fingers. There was never a moment when all parts of him were still. He wore a dark green surcoat, longer and wider than a tabard of the VII, marked with the Dark Angels symbol in white. Beneath, smaller and in red thread, there was a flame device, but its significance was a mystery to the Imperial Fist.

At the left hip hung a scabbard with a long, slender blade within, a pommel of bronze and emerald showing above a gilded crosspiece in the shape of spread wings like the icon of the Legion. A shield rested against the leg, blazoned

with the same as the Paladin's surcoat. Aeolus saw it too and raised his eyebrows. It was unusual for a shield to be used in a duel, but there was no law against it. Though it offered greater defence, the argument was that it also lessened the offensive capability of the hand that held it. If a fighter was allowed to wield two blades then a blade and shield was no different.

'He will advance on the sword side, keeping the shield towards you,' said Sigismund.

'And you tell the fishwives how to mend nets,' muttered Aeolus in remonstration.

'Sorry, Master Aeolus, my mouth gave voice to my thoughts without intervention of my faculties.'

Sigismund escorted his champion to the ringside opposite Barzareon and his second, glancing at Lord Dorn. The primarch was speaking to his Huscarl captain, Gidoreas, but his eyes were fixed on the Lion. It seemed they were discussing strategy for the forthcoming stage of the campaign by the way the captain nodded, as though taking instruction. When Fulgrim stood, one hand raised, Dorn ceased speaking and turned his eye to his champion, giving only a single nod of approval.

'Brothers, I shall spare us the tedium of asking if you wish to withdraw and offer apology to the other, because it is clear that only by the trial of champions will this disagreement be settled.'

Barzareon took up his shield and drew his blade in a fluid motion, standing relaxed with his legs shoulder width apart, knees loose, shoulders down. With the hilt of his greatsword in both hands, tip angled slightly groundward for the moment, Aeolus stood poised to guard or strike, his focus unwavering as he watched his opponent.

'Are the champions ready?'

Both answered with quiet but determined affirmatives.

'Aeolus has the measure of this,' Appius whispered, standing just behind and to Sigismund's left.

‘Begin!’

The Master of Templars launched himself at his foe, sword tip striking sparks from the Dark Angel’s upraised shield. He cut and swung and cut again, circling left towards Barzareon’s sword arm with each sidestep, forcing the Paladin to turn to meet each attack. Barzareon seemed content to weather the initial flurry, though he could not have any hope that the Imperial Fist would slow any time soon – mortal fighters might flag in a duel but legionaries could trade blows for hours without tiring, even carrying a sword as large as Aeolus’.

Barzareon started to use his sword too, parrying the occasional attack, perhaps trying to goad his foe with his passivity. Sigismund knew he would find it chafing to be fended off continually, his opponent attempting no strike of his own, but Aeolus had not risen to the position of Master of Templars because he was rash or easily taunted. He slowed his assault slightly as they circled the sand, choosing his attacks with split-second timing and hair-fine precision, but there was no way past the defence of the Lion’s champion. Round and round they went, and as the minutes ticked past, Barzareon started to make tentative strikes, rapping his sword against Aeolus’, feinting a block with the shield before twisting to make a parry.

After eleven minutes Sigismund saw what was happening. He could see the pattern in the footprints left in the sand. The Dark Angel was, circle by circle, step by step, inching closer. Aeolus would be vaguely aware that his foe was nearer now, but he would not be able to glance down and see the tracery in the sand that made the tactic so plain.

‘Masterful,’ Sigismund whispered. He allowed his gaze to flick to the two contesting primarchs. Dorn watched on with impassive interest. The Lion’s green eyes were alight, moving as they followed his champion around the ring. There was a ghost of a smile on his lips.

As well there might be, thought Sigismund. Your man is

going to win.

It took another seven minutes until Barzareon made his move. He was a metre closer to the Imperial Fists champion than when they had begun. Aeolus, perhaps sensing what was amiss, had started attacking with renewed ferocity, trying to shift his opponent backwards. He had no alternative; the moment he retreated himself, Barzareon would be able to charge, leading with the shield to deflect any counter-blow, sword ready for a winning strike. If he did not, then soon Barzareon would have negated all of the weight and reach advantage of Aeolus' blade, forcing him to fight close-in rather than at arm's length. Despite the sparks and slivers of metal struck from his shield, his arm surely numb from the beating it was weathering, Barzareon did not back off even a little.

And then he won.

Almost faster than Sigismund could follow, the Dark Angel pushed into Aeolus' next attack, using his shield not just to deflect the blow but swiping the blade to the left, across Aeolus, letting the shield fly from his grip towards the master's face as he did so. Barzareon spun, ducking low. His heel swept the Templar from his feet, sending him crashing to his back, less than half a second before Barzareon was standing again, blade-point at Aeolus' throat.

'Do you yield, Master of Templars?' Barzareon said the words with curt precision.

'I yield.'

Barzareon stepped back, sheathing his sword before he retrieved his much-battered shield, no nod or hand to his defeated opponent. It was dismissive. Almost an insult to Aeolus. Sigismund felt Appius' grip around his wrist and realised he had taken a step, ready to remonstrate with the Dark Angel.

'He'll kick your arse too,' the weapon master said. Sigismund wrenched his arm away. 'But keep training, and

one day you might be the better.’

‘It was a simple trick,’ Sigismund said to Aeolus after the master had saluted the primarchs and stepped from the circle.

Aeolus stared at him, eyes narrowing.

‘You think that makes me feel better, Templar?’ he hissed.

‘Apologies, master.’ Sigismund bowed his head.

The three Imperial Fists turned to their primarch, as all eyes had done at the moment of Barzareon’s victory. Rogal Dorn stood.

‘My champion has been bested and the cause of my brother’s complaint proven true.’ He held out both hands, palm upwards. ‘I offer my apology for speaking wrongly. I made accusation without basis and cast aspersion on his character. I retract fully any and all negative assertions regarding the Lion of Caliban. Does my brother accept?’

The Lion did not look pleased, though his champion had won and his cause had been shown superior.

‘It is regrettable that we came to such a difference over such menial matters, Rogal,’ he said slowly. Though his gaze was for the most part on Dorn, occasionally he looked to Fulgrim and, for slightly longer, Horus. ‘I understand that I am comparatively fresh to the Great Crusade, and as such an unknown quantity. But I am no less a primarch than any other. Today example has been made and I hope that none will again question my bravery, my commitment or my loyalty, nor that of my Legion.’

Dorn pulled fist to chest in salute and marched from the holotorium followed by his Huscarls.

Not once had he looked at Aeolus or his companions since the Master of Templars had been bested.

Once they were marching back along the Triumphal Way, Dorn slowed at a call from Fulgrim. Commanding the Huscarls to stop for the Phoenician, Gidoreas and his companions awaited the primarch of the Emperor’s

Children and then fell in behind the two commanders at a discreet distance – though not so far away he could not hear what was exchanged between them. Dorn had been explicit that he considered nothing beyond the ears of his highest captain, and that he did not believe himself immortal. If he were to die, he wanted Gidoreas to have a full and frank picture of his primarch's thoughts, not just a legacy of commands to follow. The Phoenician's guards went ahead.

'Your champion did well,' said Fulgrim.

'The Lion's did better.'

Gidoreas noted that the Phoenician cut his stride a little, slowing their progress along the Triumphal Way, perhaps in an attempt to spend longer with Lord Dorn. The primarch of the Imperial Fists either did not notice or did not respond, keeping to the same brisk, deliberate pace he had assumed since they had left the hall of the duel.

'I mean that although the victory went to the Dark Angels, there was no dishonour in defeat,' Fulgrim continued.

'I feel none,' said Dorn. 'Though Perhaps Aeolus does not think the same.'

'How so, brother?'

'The three best blades of the Templars stood in that room and they will all think they need to do better. Aeolus will push harder in training.'

'A commendable reaction,' said Fulgrim. 'We should all seek to attain our zenith of being, should we not? I knew you would understand that, of all my brothers.'

'I would?' Dorn's step did not falter but his tone was uncertain.

'It is in you to keep pushing, brother. Our greatness is an ever-continuing journey, not a goal or achieved state. Our legacy is never in the last victory but in the next.'

'I see what you mean, although it is not our legacy we build, it is the Emperor's.'

'Of course, brother. You put me right. It is unfortunate that

your man lost the duel, but it does not need to be an end,' Fulgrim said softly, leaning closer to Dorn. It was more familiar than conspiratorial, but Gidoreas couldn't help but think that Fulgrim's entire conversation was part of some politicking with the Lion or Horus. Perhaps the Luna Wolves commander, most senior and respected of the quorum, had sent Fulgrim to check Dorn's mood, or perhaps to tease out his intentions.

'As far as I can tell, nothing has been gained or lost at all from this distraction,' growled the Imperial Fists primarch. 'I never intended any slight to the Lion's honour.'

Fulgrim glanced at him but said nothing. After a few more strides, Dorn spoke again.

'Perhaps a little,' he confessed. 'My words were poorly chosen, and spoke against intent more than reality.'

'It's a sibling thing, I am sure,' said the Phoenician. 'Each of us wants to impress the Emperor, the Lion more than most. He is newly united with us and does not wish to appear inferior.'

'And that was my error. I perhaps meant to say that the Lion's plan did not aspire to the same service and loyalty he professed, not because he was insincere but because he had not looked at the situation as I have. His measure of success, of progress, is flawed.'

'I see.' Fulgrim pondered this for several seconds, choosing his words or perhaps simply trying again to see if silence would fish out more detail from the Imperial Fists commander. When nothing was forthcoming the Phoenician sighed gently. 'Unless we are to spend much of our time back and forth attending duels, you must consider your words more carefully, brother. There are other points of view that–'

'No, there are not.' Dorn's interruption was firm rather than harsh. 'The Emperor made plain what He wanted from us. "Remove this hidden foe and bring the Occluda Noctis to compliance." His order. It is not our place to haggle over

His words like rime vultures picking the choicest morsels from an awlwhale corpse.’

‘Be careful how you voice your opinion, is all I say.’ They were nearing the end of the Triumphal Way where the transports waited. Fulgrim slowed Dorn with a hand to his shoulder, bringing them both to a stop as they turned towards each other. ‘I support your plan, and will speak as such in conference, but you must learn some finesse in these matters.’

‘On the contrary, Fulgrim, my brother, it appears I must speak even more plainly.’ He stared squarely at the Phoenician and said the next words with hammer-blow slowness. ‘It is not my concern. I am returning to my fleet. I came here for counsel not approval. When we are done, and we return to the Emperor with our tales of success, I shall be content, and abide by His judgement, not any other’s.’

The air was tense for several seconds before Fulgrim’s laugh broke the stillness like shattering crystal, his following words light but sincere.

‘Then I can only wish you fair fortune on your endeavours. I do not know when we shall meet again, but I hope it is not too long, brother. It is important that although we may differ in many ways, we are one beneath the Master of Mankind. I look forward to standing beside you on a battlefield one day.’

Dorn smiled, a rare event for Gidoreas to witness.

‘That would be good, my brother.’

Fulgrim gave a brief, courtly bow, which Dorn answered with a sharp nod. The Emperor’s Children veterans set off in step at a gesture from their primarch and Dorn watched them leave for half a minute, his expression unreadable, brow slightly furrowed.

‘Send word to my Master of Templars,’ he said abruptly to Gidoreas. ‘Have him and his companions join me for the return to the *Herald of Dawn*. I wish to discuss with him

the duel and to convey my thanks for his representation.’

‘It has become much harder to keep track of the overall progress of the Night Crusade since Rogal Dorn divided his fleet into task forces.

‘I have been travelling with Vanguard Fleet Nightpierce, heading roughly eastward in galactic terms, on the rightmost flank of the push into the inner Occluda Noctis. Nightguard is heading north-east, as is Nightbreak. Fleets Nightblade and Nightpass are the most northerly in their intended route.

‘I’m told that astropathic communication is not directly affected by the warp occlusion – I have learned more about the warp and its ways in the last couple of years than most starfarers have need to know in their whole lifetimes! – but the majority of communication is to and from the Phalanx *command reserve rather than between the pioneer fleets, although twice now the primarch and his Legion headquarters have joined one of the vanguards because of stiff resistance. Even so, with battles on every front concluded at a good pace, thirty more systems have been added to the tally.*

‘We’re warp-bound as I commit this to record, so I cannot say for certain how long we have been separated from the Phalanx *and attendant forces, but somewhere in the region of eighty days, Terran standard. My rough count has today as the third-year anniversary since breaking warp from the Sol System, or more precisely the one thousand and ninety-fifth experienced day since I last saw the light of our star. It is almost impossible to reconcile the idea that I am three years older than when I set out, yet next time we are able to calculate realspace time, my brother, born eleven months before me, will now be younger than I am. I never gave much thought before to the sheer dislocation socially and personally that occurs during extensive warp travel.*

‘Aside from the navigational difficulties, which are

considerable and have added greatly to our time spent here, it is impossible not to feel a growing sense of isolation. We are moving system by system into virtually uncharted stars, all but blindly groping our way forward. Although most civilisations we have so far encountered have been limited to a single system, with the largest only a few dozen light years across and a handful of worlds, we could at any time run into something vastly more powerful, united and, quite possibly, utterly hostile to Imperial contact. I cannot help but remember that others have tried to prise open this wilderness before, and not only failed but also did not return, nor were able to send warning of their coming demise.

'There are tens of thousands of legionaries in the fleet that attends the Herald of Dawn*, on which I am currently occupying a small chamber, and perhaps ten times as many Imperial Army personnel. Yet I feel an immense vulnerability permeating the vanguard. Now that the overwhelming strength of the Legion has been split, the parts seem less than the whole. I must place my trust in Lord Dorn, and I am in no position to judge the merits of the greater strategy, but I would feel the better for knowing that we were closer to the other Legion fleets, that should we be swallowed by the night, they would be able to do more than merely avenge us…*

'But there is nobody else in the heart of the darkness, where the shadows between the stars run deep and we pass through systems never before seen by human or xenos. I wish I still felt the sense of marvel that spurred me on three years ago, to think myself part of history unfolding. But I am nothing really, just an observer of events that would continue whether I saw them or not. My sense of self-significance, as you might guess, has been crushed by the enormity of what we are facing.

'I feel all alone in the darkness.'

Alone in the Navigator pilaster, Rigantis Zuma cursed the name of Rogal Dorn, and he cursed himself and his pride, and he cursed his great uncle for letting the fortunes of House Zuma fall so low that its current Novator had been forced into such a gamble to restore it to its rightful greatness.

Even as he vented his frustration under his breath, Rigantis probed his immaterial surrounds with his third eye, which was as alike to regular vision as the massed surveyor banks of the *Phalanx* were to a legionary's handheld auspex. He 'saw' nothing. The warp had no physical light to touch on photoreceptors. In fact, it lacked the coherent chronology needed to allow any light to move in a meaningful manner from a source to an optic nerve. The entire thing was a construct of imagination, expectation and myth. Anyone that looked into the warp only imagined they were seeing something, Well, for about a minute, until the unshielded viewer went insane and, more than likely, clawed out their eyes, though they would never be able to forget the abstract jumble of nightmare they had perceived.

So, it was better that Rigantis did not see the warp. The organ in his forehead, a product of generations of guided mutation in the millennia of the Dark Age of Technology and careful, selective inter-breeding between Navigator Houses during Old Night, was an extension of his brain's prefrontal cortex, like the mirrors of a periscope that allowed one to see things from a different angle. His 'eye' amplified the connection between the powerhouse of rationality and reasoning and the unconscious connection to the warp that all humans possessed. It allowed his brain to make sense of the senseless – at least to recognise such patterns that existed to be exploited.

At least, that was what it was meant to do.

Currently he couldn't see anything. Not the slightest glint of the Astronomican refracted from a tangent wave; not a

glimmer of a tidecrest curve to ride; not the wake of a starship; not even a telltale glimmer of a billion souls lighting the warp as a vast hall might be dimly lit by a multitude of small candles.

Nothing.

He was only aware in the vaguest sense that they were moving, but if Lord Dorn had used the intervox there and then to interrogate his chief Navigator, Rigantis would not have been able to say with any confidence that they were even heading in the same direction as the course laid in at the last translation.

He hated having to check position again, but incautious Navigators did not survive to become Novators. He opened the link to the Navigation liaison on the strategium.

'Engine controls, prepare for warp jump. Two minutes, standard displacement.'

'Finally got us somewhere, Novator?' There was doubt and hope in the officer's tone. *'A preliminary report for the primarch?'*

'I need to correlate with a realspace reading again. If you wish to make a report to the lord primarch, please convey this. He can travel fast, or he can travel where he wishes to end up. I don't mind which he chooses, but he cannot have both.'

'I... I'll prepare the engine crew for jump. Better not disturb Lord Dorn at the moment.'

A wise choice, but Rigantis didn't make any comment, his attention drawn by something he thought he had detected in the great nothing of the unlit warp. It had looked like a ship. Less substantial, more wraithlike. He was not sure he had seen it at all, a blur that had slipped across the prow of the *Phalanx*, barely within lance range. Now he saw it again. It offered no response and seemed unaware of the massive starship. It might have been nothing, a distortion of light on the dome from somewhere on the main hull, or a simple trick of the mind – Rigantis and his family, like all

the Navigators, were mounting an unbroken vigil to guide the massive starbase through the ether. Fatigue had long ago become a factor and wouldn't be improving any time soon.

'Forget that last instruction, captain of drives,' he announced on the intervox. 'Tell Lord Dorn I think we need to regroup for a few hours. My compatriots on other vessels will be equally becalmed, let the *Phalanx* send a chorus of astropathic messages to become a short-range beacon. If we are to lose our way, better that we all lose it together.'

A thousand star systems altogether had been brought to compliance by the Night Crusade. The news came via astrotelepathic message from the Luna Wolves. Horus Lupercal had been keeping count across his brothers' intermittent reports and wished them to know this achievement. On the *Phalanx* this was little cause for celebration. Warp jumps towards the centre of the Occluda Noctis were a fraction of the length at the boundary, and every planet discovered, every foe encountered, every war fought, was a painfully meticulous process because of that reason. Only about a tenth of total compliances were due to the Imperial Fists, and Gidoreas felt the mood on the strategium worsening at the news.

Through these thoughts, he heard his name being calmly uttered by Rogal Dorn, who had just dismissed the head of astropaths, Lady Evida Kilnestriskiya. Gidoreas mounted the steps quickly and replaced her at the primarch's side, looking at a schematic of the Occluda Noctis.

'The circumference has been completely brought into the Imperium,' Dorn said quietly. The tri-D glimmered with insignia of the Legions that had reported the fall of worlds, the absorption or conquest of five hundred and more civilisations, each now another facet to the glorious jewel that was the Emperor of Mankind's great creation. It was a

circle with spiralling fronds starting to head towards the interior, the movements of the fleets now coming into harmony with each other, though datastamps next to each system told a far less elegant story of hampered campaigns and stuttering warp travel even at the periphery.

'Impressive,' said Gidoreas, seeing it laid out in the air above the hololith. He glanced at his commander, who watched the slowly circling display with one hand raised to his chin in thought. 'Even for the worlds in the twilight.'

He smiled then, Lord Dorn, and flicked a glance at Gidoreas.

'Yes, the roads followed by my brothers may not have been as laborious as ours, but they have all travelled a long way.'

What was also stark about the display was the blackness that filled the roughly teardrop shape of the Occluda Noctis. Aside from the thread slowly widening in the wake of the Imperial Fists, the *Phalanx* and the vanguards to the north and east were several thousand light years away from the closest systems under control of their Legion allies.

'Too slow,' said the primarch, almost a whisper, his gaze hardening as it returned to the display. 'Too many ships covering not enough ground. Ninety-nine point eight per cent of jumps are taking us into empty systems.'

'As long as we are limited to warp jumps of a few light years, if we spread further we shall lose any coherency between our left and right flanks,' said Gidoreas. 'We're already stretched supporting the peripheral flotillas from the centre. Split the fleets up any more and they really will be on their own.'

'You are thinking about the lost fleets?'

'Nothing we have encountered yet has possessed a fraction of the power that would have been needed. If we encounter this hidden foe whilst the fleet is scattered…'

'It occupies my thoughts too, my Huscarl. The truth is that we are already vulnerable. Whatever wiped out the

previous expeditions is potent enough to destroy a vanguard fleet,' answered the primarch, his hand becoming a fist as he lowered it to the edge of the hololith, causing fractures to flicker through the projection. 'Fifty ships or five ships, it makes no difference. In fact, if we are to encounter that enemy, better to lose five than fifty. We need to find this foe if we are to bring the weight of our power against it.'

Ultimately every Imperial asset was expendable, and although Gidoreas did not place his primarch in that same category, he knew Rogal Dorn did not consider himself indispensable. Even so, Gidoreas was surprised to hear his lord commander suggest he would expend the lives of his sons simply to lure the enemy into revealing themselves.

'Use our own ships as bait, my lord?'

'No, that is not my intent,' Dorn replied quickly. 'New standing orders will be to withdraw upon detecting any evidence of higher social life. As we advance to the centre we'll spread our eyes further to the flanks, and where they alight upon something worthwhile, we then gather our strength.'

'The scout fleets will alert any potential enemies to our approach,' said Gidoreas. 'They will have more time to prepare defences.'

'Or welcome…'

The smile returned for an instant and the Master of the Huscarls realised that his commander actually enjoyed juggling these strategic impossibilities; the teasing out of the best course of action from a hundred different bad options. It stretched the primarch's thinking to the limits and he relished the challenge.

He recalled something Dorn had said at the parade held in honour of the primarch being united with the Legion.

The harder matched, the greater the victory.

Rogal Dorn did not care for the plaudits heaped upon others, but Gidoreas realised that his primarch judged

himself more harshly than any of his brothers because there was only one critic he counted worthy – the Emperor Himself.

From her position at one of the main sensor banks, Nyttalya Kirasov counted out the number of wrecks picked up by the sensor sweep.

'…four… five… six escorts. Three capital ships and six escorts, lord primarch.'

The announcement was met with grim silence by all in the strategium. Standing close to Kirasov, Gidoreas bowed his head in memory of the lost. Raising his gaze after a couple of seconds he looked across to his commander, not sure what he would see.

Rogal Dorn stood with fists and jaw clenched, eyes fixed on the smear of debris and energy residue resolving on the main hololith. The remains of Task Force Gamma-Sixteen formerly of the Nightpierce vanguard fleet. There was no sign of their foes. Was the anger directed at this unknown enemy or himself? Had it been the primarch's decision to split the scouting flotillas into even smaller task forces that had brought about the destruction of Gamma-Sixteen? It was the same decision that saw the *Phalanx* now alone in the system. A flotilla in its own right, it had investigated the lack of communication from the lost vessels.

'Plasma wash!'

The shout came from the secondary survey banks just below Gidoreas' position. Red icons flickered into life within the hololith, appearing in the wake of the *Phalanx*'s approach towards the inner system. Warning sirens blared into life although the Imperial Fists starbase was already at battle stations.

Reports of powering weapons and loaded torpedoes echoed back and forth from the weaponry stations. Vox-speakers rang with the tinny voices of the Mechanicum acolytes marshalling the void shield generators, main

engines and plasma reactors.

Dorn watched the hololith without moving, sure in the knowledge that his crew were drilled to perfection. Even so, when he received the signal that all was prepared, Gidoreas made his way across the strategium to personally inform the primarch.

'All at battle readiness, Lord Dorn.'

'Thank you, captain.' The primarch gave him the courtesy of a brief glance before focusing again on the display. He nodded, just a fraction, as the latest signal returns updated, charting the course of the plasma plumes that had been detected – presumably the engines of enemy vessels. 'They were not expecting us. Look, see how they have changed from their original course. Their first bearing was taking them crosswise to our position.'

Gidoreas saw what the primarch described. The first trio of icons were moving almost perpendicular to the course of the *Phalanx*, but the latter two were now heading towards it.

'So they were not waiting for us, my lord.' Gidoreas rubbed his bearded chin with an armoured knuckle. 'They were not heading towards the battle at all.'

'Or away. Possibly a patrol, possibly someone completely different,' said the primarch. 'There is no inhabited world, no sign of any technological presence, so something else must have persuaded Captain Faurstern to bring his task force further in-system. Detecting the engine residue of a regular patrol may have been the cause.'

'It would stretch coincidence that ships without any association to those which destroyed our squadrons happened to be in the area just days after.'

'I agree. Treat all contacts as hostile.' The primarch raised his voice. 'Full stop and bring us about towards the other ships. All weapons on standby and gunnery teams calculate firing solutions but do not set target locks until commanded. Nobody is to fire without explicit orders.

Sensoria teams, tight sweeps to pick up enemy locks, scans or launch of void craft.'

Affirmatives rang back across the broad strategium. Secondary hololiths sprang into life, filling the broad space with panels of light. Manipulating the controls at the edge of the command dais, Dorn duplicated several and overlaid them onto the main display.

'A patrol in force,' he declared, stepping back.

Gidoreas didn't see it at first. The primarch had projected the course of the unknown ships back out of sensor range, and from the positioning of the Imperial wrecks calculated their arrangement and the enemy's likely attack vector. After a few seconds, the Master of the Huscarls saw how the foe that had attacked Gamma-Sixteen must have entered the star system on the same heading as the ships now on the display.

'The enemy are not expecting another ship or fleet, they've resumed their usual patrol route,' said the primarch. 'It'd be sensible to presume that either Captain Faurstern did not broadcast any messages about the Imperial expedition, or the enemy did not detect it.'

'Do you think Faurstern attacked them rather than trying to make peaceful contact?'

'Impossible to know, without any survivors to tell us,' said Dorn. 'Given the relative positions, Gamma-Sixteen might have been trying to break back past the enemy ships in an attempt to reach the Mandeville point and jump, as my standing orders dictate.'

'Faurstern is one of our newer officers, he would have considered it quite a coup to bring you the evidence of a new civilisation contact.'

'Indeed.' Dorn went back to the controls and dismissed his overlays, leaving only the blinking runes depicting the incoming ships. There was a trio of signatures registering, although at their current distance, a larger ship's plasma plume would potentially blot out those of trailing or smaller

vessels.

‘Engines, proceed on main drives only, fifty per cent power,’ announced the primarch. ‘Power down rear batteries one through four.’

The orders echoed back from the legionaries receiving them, and within a minute the schematics of the *Phalanx* in a sub-display had changed to represent the new status of the engines and power grid.

‘I know that you are fully aware of the *Phalanx*’s reduced capabilities when at less than battle speed, my lord, so I feel I must ask what you intend?’

Rogal Dorn did not answer for several seconds, lost in contemplation, his eyes regarding one of the hololiths further out into the vastness of the strategium. He blinked and turned his gaze on the Huscarl.

‘I want to have a good look at these enemy ships. They may be dissuaded from coming closer if they detect the mass and power of the *Phalanx*, so we are masquerading as a smaller vessel.’

Gidoreas nodded. Subterfuge was not a common tactic among the Legiones Astartes, and the VII Legion in particular. The general wisdom was that it relied too much upon the shortcomings of the enemy, the hope that they did not detect any ruse. In the current circumstance Gidoreas could see why they might want to conceal their strength and invite attack, as much as it would be counter-intuitive in most situations.

The other ships were not shy in their intent and accelerated towards the *Phalanx* over the following minutes. One of the plasma plumes resolved into two smaller vessels, and as they entered combat scanning range Nyttalya Kirasov made a confident announcement.

‘Two capital-class and two escort-mass ships, my lord. Direct heading. High energy discharge suggests weapons armed.’

From another sensor bank the presence of attempted

targeting scans was confirmed.

'Very well, enemies are confirmed hostile,' declared Dorn.

'It is protocol to broadcast messages demanding peaceful accord and compliance, my lord,' Gidoreas said quietly. The words felt heavy on his tongue, telling the primarch what he must already know, but his duties as second-in-command were clear. 'Shall I give the order?'

'Not this time, my Huscarl,' Dorn said slowly, brow furrowed. 'I do not think it would be heeded and I would rather not broadcast our intent while the enemy may still turn away and elude battle. I want to have a good look at them.'

The enemy ships swept onwards, coming within range of the lances, but Dorn gave no order for the laser turrets to lock on and fire. About a minute later, a shout from the surveyor crews warned that the *Phalanx* was being targeted by multiple weapon locks.

'Reactors to one hundred and ten per cent, engines full ahead!' barked the primarch, turning away from the strategium and heading towards the gate at the back of the dais. 'All repair teams to concentrate on void shields. Power up the teleportaria prime. Master of the Huscarls, assemble a strike force of fifty legionaries. Provost-Lieutenant Vendraal, you have strategium command.'

'You mean to board the enemy, my lord?' said Gidoreas, striding after his primarch as another chorus of affirmatives filled the chamber.

'I want a good, close look, as I suspect they do,' said the primarch, his fingers curling into fists inside his massive gauntlets. 'The loss of an entire task force is deserving of my *personal* attention.'

He continued to issue clipped commands to the weapons crews, navigational teams and teleportaria staff as they made their way down the decks towards the main teleportation hall. Gidoreas issued the muster command to five squads of the Huscarls, ordering them to attend the

primarch in the teleportaria prime. The vox broke with the news that the enemy had opened fire with laser weapons, the first beams absorbed by the layers of void shields protecting the *Phalanx*.

'No return fire,' replied Dorn. 'Not until my command. Surveyors, is there any sign of void shields on the enemy vessels?'

The reply took several seconds.

'No, lord primarch,' Kirasov told him. *'It's a different energy pattern, but their shields appear to be more like standard power fields. Teleportation should be possible.'*

'Should?' snapped Gidoreas. 'We are not sending the primarch across by teleporter with "should" as an assurance, lieutenant.'

'Of course not, lieutenant-commander, I will consult with the teleportaria Mechanicum adepts.'

'Time to teleport range?' the primarch asked as their conveyor rapidly slowed to a stop.

'Three minutes and four seconds at current speeds, lord primarch,' the navigational officer confirmed.

They advanced towards the main teleportation chamber as, from the opposite end of the corridor, Gidoreas' squads arrived: clad in Terminator armour, five abreast as they came to a stop by the broad gates of the teleportaria prime. They looked more like a wall of metal and ceramite than a demi-company of warriors.

The doors rumbled open to reveal a broad, low hall bathed in electric light. Energy splayed from exposed relays, wreathing the teleport platform with actinic arcs. Mechanicum tech-priests, their faces hidden in the cowls of their red robes, busied themselves at the controls and conduits.

'Magos Orthsiax assures me that the enemy power fields will not interfere with the teleporter guidance beam, my lord,' Kirasov informed them.

'Let me send a squad first, just to be sure,' said Gidoreas.

The primarch did not reply but strode amongst the Mechanicum acolytes, head turning one way and then another as he looked for something. He came upon their leader, Magos Orthsiax, who turned away from a spark-filled glass tube, the articulated tentacles arching from his back momentarily dipping in a semblance of a bow.

'What is the surety of the teleport beam assessment, magos?' Dorn demanded.

Artificial eyes glittered in the shadow of the magos' cowl and when he spoke, his voice was sibilant and phlegmy.

'One hundred per cent surety, Rogal Dorn. I have made the calculations myself and they have been verified by three independent adjudicators.'

'Very well, continue the preparations.'

'Full teleportaria prime capability is already engaged, Rogal Dorn,' the magos informed him.

'Understood.'

Gidoreas approached the magos as Dorn stepped away.

'I want complete monitoring of all teleportation signals. The moment, the very moment there is any fluctuation or interference, you are to initiate return protocols.'

Gidoreas glanced at his commander to see if he had any contrary instruction. Although it was clear that he had heard the Huscarl's order, the primarch made no effort to countermand it.

'Affirmative, Lieutenant-Commander Gidoreas,' the magos said with another dip of his artificial limbs.

'Glavius formation,' Dorn ordered the Huscarls as he stepped up to the platform, his golden armour glinting with energy discharges from the surrounding machinery. The squads assembled around the primarch with Gidoreas just to his left, the squads in five files behind.

'My lord, incoming fire is overloading the first bank of void shield generators,' Vendraal reported.

Dorn said nothing, taking his helm from his waist and fixing it with a twist of the hands. His head turned to

Orthsiax.

'Do you have a target vessel, magos?'

'Capital class, Rogal Dorn. I have identified and locked on. Would you prefer to attack power production or command?'

'Command deck,' Dorn replied without hesitation.

'As you order, we obey, Rogal Dorn.'

'Provost-lieutenant.' Dorn returned his gaze directly ahead. 'All weapons to target second capital ship at the moment of teleportation.'

'Understood, lord primarch.'

Deep in the bowels of the *Phalanx*, there was nothing to feel of the fusillade being unleashed against the starbase; the terrible energies invoked by the void shield generators to shunt that rage aside and protect the hull. Gidoreas listened to the vox reports, a steady litany of failing and repaired generators. His concentration was broken by Magos Orthsiax announcing that they were within teleport range.

'Activate the moment you have target fix, magos,' said Dorn. 'Huscarls, slay or suppress all enemy in vicinity of our arrival. Full engagement, no relent.'

'For the Emperor!' Gidoreas bellowed, drawing his power sword and raising his combi-bolter.

'For the Emperor!' the Huscarls echoed as the fronds of teleportation energy flared into frenzied life, slashing across the platform and dancing from gilded armour.

Gidoreas felt the lurch of dislocation in his eyes more than anywhere else, for an instant nothing more than a notion flying across an infinitely small stretch of warp space towards the target ship. His disassociation ended abruptly as his body re-formed at the chosen location, a momentary numbness replaced by a spike in sensation as his corporeal being reassembled.

They were in a brightly lit, dome-like structure. Above was a crystalline observation pane through which he could see stars and the flash of azure laser discharge from a dorsal-

mounted weapons array. Panels glittering with electronic displays and glowing, gemlike controls cast dapples of amber and red across the white surface of the consoles and the seamless decking.

Gidoreas saw a human – humanoid – in a loose, long coat of grey over pale blue trousers. She had short hair and a tattoo on her cheek in a sigil he did not recognise. Her expression was of complete shock as she turned from her panel towards him. He lifted his combi-bolter and opened fire, turning her chest to a ragged red hole, her innards splashing across the control panel, fragments of bone shattering one of the screens. Around Gidoreas, the Huscarls turned and broke formation, weapons roaring.

Dorn leapt forwards, his huge chainsword in one hand cutting down two foes in a single sweep, its teeth slashing with a screech through the edge of a control console.

The attack lasted only a few seconds and then silence fell. Glancing around, Gidoreas counted twenty-one dead. The controls were riddled with bolt-detonation craters, the material they were made from more like stone than metal or plastek.

'Guard!' he snapped, pointing to a pair of doors at one side of the dome. Vortagir's squad stepped up, their combi-bolters at the ready.

'We are aboard,' Dorn announced across the vox.

'Lord commander, the enemy are disengaging,' Vendraal reported hurriedly. *'Except for your vessel! They are turning into a collision course with the* Phalanx*.'*

As if in confirmation, high-pitched wails shrieked from hidden address systems. The screeching sound set Gidoreas' hearts racing, speaking a language that needed no words.

'Target this vessel with all batteries,' Dorn snapped, moving back towards the Huscarls. 'Magos, immediate evacuation. Now!'

Despite his gene-engineered body, Gidoreas felt a wave of

nausea as the teleportaria snatched hold of him and the others again, ripping them back through the warp to its gleaming dais. Fully materialised, his body ached down to the bones, while groans and coughs from others around him revealed that he was not alone in his discomfort.

Dorn had already stepped down, the armoured doors parting at his approach. Gidoreas sheathed his sword and lumbered after as best he could.

The primarch turned and headed along the transitway to a viewing gallery aft of the teleportaria. He strode up to the massive armoured windows, craning his neck to look out at the approaching enemy ship.

Gidoreas arrived as the main guns of the *Phalanx* opened fire, crashing high explosive and plasma into the energy fields of the incoming vessel. White stars of resistance flared from its protective sheath, almost blinding despite the auto-senses of the Huscarl's war plate. More and more guns joined the barrage, so that the enemy ship looked more like a streaking comet than a vessel, encased in a rippling shell of detonations and energy discharge.

Finally, the lance turrets drew their power from the grid, five scarlet beams that slashed across the interloper as it sped onwards on its crash course. Two flared uselessly from the shields, but three hit the hull, slicing through deck after deck, almost cutting the ship in half. In the depths, something detonated – a reactor most likely – and Gidoreas' visor darkened for an instant to protect his eyes against the flare. When sight returned, a few jags of plasma-coiled debris spun haphazardly across the stars, their light quickly guttering away to nothing in the void.

'Other enemy vessels are accelerating hard, moving towards our sensor boundary, Lord Dorn,' Vendraal reported from the strategium. *'Shall we set engines for pursuit?'*

'Follow as fast as you can, but I do not think we will catch them,' the primarch replied. The last few flickers of

burning ship reflected through the armaglass on his golden armour. ‘I think this enemy wish to remain unknown while they can.’

The crash of bolters resounded harshly along the corridors, at odds with the high-pitched shriek of the unknown enemy’s lascarbines. Fafnir Rann fired again, using the loop-angle cut into the edge of his shield to steady his aim, staring just over its rim to sight the shot as his auto-senses threw targeting data across his view.

The enemy had used a haywire device to blanket the local electrics and other systems, killing the onboard surveyors and plunging the port upper decks of the cruiser *Karolinga* into freezing darkness. The shadows should not have aided them, the darkness no obstacle to a legionary’s genhanced eyes and the visual amplification systems of his armour. Yet the darkness was not the boarders’ only defence, married with light-bending fields that shifted the spectral register of the wearer so that, to the artificial senses of Rann, they appeared like shifting haze that fractured from the ultraviolet all the way through to infrared. Movement flickered but nothing registered as solid foe. Light and colour, like the flare of sun on a targeting scope, fragments from a prism hanging in the air at the edge of vision.

His only hope of hitting a foe was reacting quickly enough to the origin point of their shots – an almost impossible feat given their lasweapons and constant, occluded movement.

‘This isn’t working,’ the sergeant growled, more to himself than anybody else. Along with his squad of breachers, he had two support units of Legion tacticals.

‘Forget independent fire,’ he announced to his small command. ‘Volley fire, alternating ranks, aim for walls and ceiling for shrapnel effect, on my command. Prepare grenades for pre-assault.’

Las-bolts ripped along the front of his shield in the sudden quiet brought about by the Imperial Fists’ ceasefire. Rann

pulled out a fragmentation charge and primed it in his hand. Red lights flashed from ochre armour along the line of breachers holding the corridor.

In the seconds before he gave his next command, Rann's thoughts flashed back to the moments that had brought him to this point. The sudden, inexplicable arrival of four unidentified ships, appearing nowhere near the Mandeville boundary of the system where warp translation was possible. Agile, with powerful lasers, they had singled out the *Karolinga* in minutes, targeting the engines as the strike cruiser had attempted to come about and bring its torpedoes to bear.

They had been a sitting target, the two other flotilla ships still hours away from interceding, but the enemy had closed for boarding, rather than picking off their shield generators with the same precision they had hit the engines while avoiding the reactors.

Why the foe had taken the risk of boarding hadn't made sense at first, but then reports from the first-response squads revealed that a dozen or more Legion serfs were missing. Taken captive. It had looked as though the enemy would withdraw, but when the first legionaries had caught up with them, they reversed their retreat, determining to avail themselves of a different prisoner.

They had found that Imperial Fists did not take kindly to the attempt.

'Now!'

Rann threw his grenade with the others, the small disc arcing along the corridor to airburst about forty metres away, blossoming into fire and slender ceramic filaments that shredded anything less than carapace armour.

Even as the smoke and fire engulfed the passageway, he gave the order to open fire. His bolter coughed along with the rest of the breachers', its explosive warhead hitting the ferrocrete bulkheads to shower cutting shards across the corridor.

‘Advance twenty,’ he barked as the second line, the tacticals, opened fire past the shield-bearing legionaries, aiming high to fill the passageway with deadly splinters of metal and artificial stone.

Twenty paces later his squad set down their shields and fired again, blanketing the space from wall to wall in bolts and detonations. Gazing past his breacher shield, Rann looked at the enemy for the first time.

They had started as a rumour among the Navigators, of something disturbing the stillness of the warp nearby. Ships moving where they could not move. Ghosts, echoes, visions of the future perhaps. The warp was a place where there was no such thing as impossible.

The tales persisted, leaking from the Navis militant teams to the crew, one cadre of indentured guards sharing their unease with another. Here they gained a name.

The Unseen.

Word had come to the legionaries soon enough, but speculation and Navigators’ jitters were no basis for alarm.

From what Rann had heard, Nightbreak had lost the first ships about three weeks earlier. Corvettes, destroyers and a transport investigating a seemingly barren system had gone dark. When a reinforced flotilla had arrived to investigate they had found debris and plasma, but nothing of the enemy. Some said the *Phalanx* itself had been attacked, but Iago had informed the squads that there was no confirmed report.

That had been the first, but not the last. Five more ships had been lost since, in Nightbreak alone. All Imperial Army until now. Perhaps the Unseen had run out of luck when they had targeted the *Karolinga*.

‘I see you now,’ Rann grunted, looking at the human-shaped mess on the floor about twenty metres in front of him. Red blood, two arms, two legs, clad in a silvery mesh that was still hard to see even now the woman had stopped moving.

A brief flurry of las-fire caught the breachers as they next advanced – the Unseen had retreated and re-formed in the seconds between the two volleys of fire. They were not swift enough to elude the second volley of the pattern, half a dozen falling as the fire from the tacticals roared forth.

'I think they wanted to recover the bodies, sergeant,' suggested Ordera, pointing with his bolter. A ragged mess of scarlet and silver disappeared around a junction ahead, seemingly moved by two multicoloured zephyrs.

'Not this time,' Rann replied. 'Keep forward, prepare for counter-boarding!'

As much as the Unseen wanted to find out who was crewing the ships they attacked, Legion command would want to know who was attacking them. Protecting the ship was more important than living captives, but if they could take the enemy vessel it would be an early turn in favour of the Imperium's warriors.

'Rapid fire, full-speed advance, run them into the deck!'

Give them time to withdraw on their own terms and he had no doubt the Unseen would get away. Not today. Not after coming for *his* ship and *his* people.

This had been the plan, of course. Send out enough ships, some of them would find something to fight. Any other commander might have chosen his most expendable troops for these scouting forays, willing to sacrifice them for the greater strategic gain. Not Lord Dorn. Each 'sword-point flotilla' – the task forces furthest ahead of the main fleet – included at least one Legion ship, and those ships had been crewed from the best formations: the 22nd, 45th and 51st Assault Cadres; the Third Terran Garrison, whose bland name covered a century of fighting at the forefront of the Legion's most dangerous wars; and, in what some believed was an act of penance after the master had failed in the duel with the Dark Angel, the Templars had left the *Phalanx*, save for a small ceremonial guard, and were at the front line of the advance.

Not sacrificial scouts, but a warning to whatever encountered them that the might of the Imperium could not be matched.

Rann had heard third-hand of Unseen encounters reported as far away as Nightpass. If that was true, the expedition had run into a foe that could operate across a battlefront of more than two thousand light years. It stretched coincidence if they were not the force responsible for the disappearance of the previous expeditions.

And if that was right, vengeance was due.

Reaching a steady run, the breacher team gained the junction a few seconds later, half peeling to the left and the other half to the right, allowing the legionaries of the tactical squads to fill in behind. The las-fire all came from the left, the route to the enemy entry point: brief concentrated flurries from rapidly withdrawing firers.

'They're trying to get away, full charge!' roared Rann, hoisting up his shield and breaking into a fresh sprint, bolter firing into the general area of the retreating Unseen. 'Anybody coming up on our position from aft?'

'Negative, sergeant,' came the reply from Iago, now lieutenant and acting commander of the ship. Pollux had been made commander of a battle-barge in another flotilla. *'All host forces required to stem breakthrough in the starboard prow.'*

'Shall we break off and assist, lieutenant?' Rann made the offer on instinct, but he really didn't want to let the Unseen get away. 'We're nearly at the boarding point.'

'Carry on, sergeant,' came Iago's swift reply, lending more energy to Rann's efforts.

Even so, they had barely covered another fifty metres, less than half the remaining distance to the melta-cut ring where the enemy ship had burrowed directly through the hull, when the vox crackled again. Even as he listened to the message, fresh salvoes of las-bolts screeched from the dark ahead.

‘They bolted,’ said Iago. *‘All three ships have disengaged, full-thrust departure.’*

‘They left their own behind, the dishonourable cowards!’ snapped Portok.

‘No, they’re quitting while they’re ahead,’ replied Rann, remembering the missing serfs. ‘They got the captives they came for. Well, some of them. Pretty bloody ruthless to cut loose their own.’

‘Purge protocols, all squads,’ announced Iago. That was clear enough. No prisoners. *‘No time for loose ends. We need the gun decks secure and the engines back online in case the enemy want to try to finish what they started.’*

Rann fired back at a cluster of red blasts that flashed towards him from an archway ahead. In the burst of more bolt detonations, he saw a silver-suited form crumple to the ground, head missing. In the years he’d been with the Legion, he hadn’t encountered anything like the Unseen. They were coordinated and widespread, and although their weapons and armour were no match for a legionary’s, their mobility across star systems seemed almost magical. There seemed little chance they would hang around for a stand-up fight. They would have to be forced into it.

Rann had no doubts about it. The Imperial Fists had finally found the killers in the heart of the night.

Both hearts pounding like war drums, Sigismund threw himself across the threshold of the broken temple, his sword slick with the blood of the Unseen. He had no idea why they valued the tumbled-down pile of overgrown stones, all that mattered was that they had fled here but would not find the sanctuary they had hoped for.

The main structure was relatively intact, a colonnaded oval about eighty metres across and one hundred and twenty long, a trio of thin evergreen trees growing at one end, each as tall as a Battle Titan. The light was faint and pale, giving everything a silver shimmer that reminded the

Templar of the spectral disruption suits the Unseen used. Their reliance on misdirection and evasion would be their downfall – Sigismund's sword swept out at the rainbow phantasms that flitted ahead of him, not caring where the swift tip struck. Blood spattered from bursts of colour, sometimes bringing down a foe with limb or head missing, or chest slashed open to the organs. It had been jarring the first couple of times, to see a corpse seemingly tumble out of a trick of the light, gory and solid in a way that defied the ethereal quality of the Unseen.

Other Templars charged through the broken walls and toppled columns, heading up stairs to the three surrounding towers, blades and bolters hunting the Unseen wherever they tried to flee.

'Search everywhere,' came the order from Menold, commander of the group. *'They came here for a reason, a portal or ship or something. Find it!'*

It had been almost chance that the *Temperus Initiator* had detected the surge of an artificial power source beneath the surface of the long-abandoned world. Before the roar of landing jets and the subsequent deafening clamour of battle, it was silent – not a bird or beast had been detected. There was life here, vast forests, teeming oceans, auspexes picked up countless microbes, but not a single larger creature of air or land, like an incomplete recreation. The air was fresh and pure, near perfect for humans. The thought was that it had been partially settled, interrupted by some calamity of Old Night.

The temple sat atop a lone mountain that broke from a continent-sized forest, its square kilometres of dorms broken open and its cloisters engulfed by the encroaching arboreal besiegers. Whatever the Unseen had activated it was not on the surface, and the signal had disappeared almost as quickly as it had been discovered – long enough to bring the wrath of the Imperial Fists.

Lashing out at zephyrs and shadows, Sigismund recalled

the words of Rogal Dorn when he had called him to council along with Aeolus and Appius. It had been a rare moment, in the primarch's quarters rather than on the strategium, which had made it feel like a personal matter rather than one of command. Dorn had sat in a broad chair, divested of his armour, a goblet of wine in one hand, very much at ease. They joined him in his repast, and he talked to them. He spoke at length about many things, in a casual manner, but came back frequently to a single theme: that all combat was based on a few principles, whether between duellists or whole empires. Master the fundamentals and one could excel at all forms of battle.

There is one truth that comes before all others, an understanding you must keep at the core of all thought and action when in conflict. Execute thy will.

Trapped by those they had thought to elude, the Unseen were now subject to the will of the Templars advancing across root-cracked stones with deliberate strides, the flare of las-blasts lighting the ruins as the Unseen realised they could no longer run.

Strategy must always be flexible, open to review and revision, but purpose cannot be. One might upend an entire war plan, abandon objectives and start afresh as long as the purpose for the strategy is still understood. It is the subtle change of purpose that is your greatest foe. To adapt too far, without the realisation that one is now responding to the will of an opponent, not one's own. It is your task to bend them, break them, lure them to that point so that you can execute your purpose and they cannot, no matter how well or hard they fight.

Menold had made the purpose of the Templars clear the moment he had unleashed them on the Unseen outpost – the sky alight with drop pods and gunship engines. The fear of the Imperium would be carved into their thoughts so deeply that they would flee to their nests and seek peace. The more Sigismund moved amongst the flowing half-

silhouettes caught in the pale light, the smoother his movements became, as his mind and body learned to predict, to adjust, informed by every stroke that went before. Unthinking, he started to read the fluctuations in spectral projection that signified movement towards the left or the right, to sense the coalescing moment as a target slowed, or the fragmentation that signified acceleration. Now one in three strikes found flesh, where it had been one in ten when he had first set foot on the rubble.

Our purpose is set before the first action. My Master of Templars, you lost today not because your opponent was superior in skill, or forethought, or even deception. Barzareon did nothing but what he intended to do from the instant he donned his battleplate. He would get close enough to beat you. That was all he intended, all he needed to set into his thoughts. His will decided, all that remained was the execution.

When you set eyes upon a foe with a shield, you chose your purpose, not before. You assumed that in making that choice of wargear, your opponent would defend, and thus you set your purpose to overcome that defence. You did not decide your purpose, Barzareon did. His wargear should have been irrelevant to your purpose. Your implementation of strategy would change depending upon it, but your will should have been your own, as it always was before. You saw an opponent geared for defence and thought he would defend, and so gave no consideration to the notion that perhaps his purpose was to attack. Yet also you should have known that Barzareon could not win a duel by defence alone. You did not think about his inner purpose because you had not settled upon your own.

Boots scraping across the rough stone, Sigismund came to a halt, chainsword held to his right. The multicoloured ghosts of the Unseen flowed away from him and those following, yet they did not seem to be heading towards any particular point. Flickers ahead and to either side showed

that some were circling back, while others had dared the blades of the Templars to move through their line.

If you do not know the enemy's will, how can you know when they have been driven away from its achievement? To claim victory, one must know the enemy is defeated; total victory comes only from executing your will and ensuring that the enemy has not executed theirs. All the misdirection and anarchy and uncertainty of battle cannot obscure that simple truth.

The primarch's words were like weights crashing into place in his thoughts, the shock of their recollection momentarily stunning him. But there was no hazard. The Unseen had not so much as threatened a counter-attack, though clearly they had numerical and positional advantage.

'Master Menold!' Sigismund turned, seeking his commander through the tumble of vegetation and stone. 'What is the enemy's purpose here?'

'What do you mean?'

'What purpose of the enemy are we seeking to thwart? Why are we here?'

There was nothing from the vox for several seconds. Blade crashes and bolter roars filled the space, coming from every direction. Sigismund didn't know if Menold was too engaged to give an answer or considering his reply, or possibly ignoring an unseemly distraction. In the duel, Sigismund had been forbidden to warn of what he had seen, but that was not the case now.

'Something is wrong here, master,' he voxed again, keeping his channel personal so that he did not voice concerns with the others. He started forward at a steadier pace, but as he advanced, the Unseen flowed away from him like fog, until he was almost in the centre of the main temple space. There was no crossfire, no counter-charge. 'There is nothing here, master. Nothing but the enemy… and us.'

‘Are you saying that we are their target? This has been a trap from the start? Then why is it not yet sprung?’

‘If we ascribe to enemy purpose what we thought was chance, it makes sense,’ said Sigismund. ‘Their signal brought us. We have no mission here except to attack the Unseen. Why are they here?’

‘By the lifewater, Sigismund, you are right. Something made possible by our presence here. The Unseen stay true to their name. They would never reveal themselves except to conceal a greater movement. It is not that we are here, *it is that we are* not *aboard the* Temperus Initiator*. They mean to take the ship!’*

The command channel buzzed into life as Menold issued immediate withdrawal orders, calling in the gunships that were patrolling overhead. As the Templars started to fall back to the scorched clearing where they had made planetfall, the Unseen came after them with sudden vehemence. Las-blasts seared across the half-night, concentrated on the rearguard squads. It was clear to Sigismund that the enemy intended to get between the Templars and their transports, whatever the cost.

Sigismund found himself at Menold’s side at the tip of a wedge driving towards the landing grounds, into the storm of Unseen resistance. Ahead, the gunships descended on plumes of plasma, weapons blazing, even as the vox crackled with communication from the ship in orbit: Unseen vessels, two of them, had been detected coming in at speed. The Unseen had been willing to spend the lives of their soldiers on the surface so that they could board against minimal resistance. It would be a close-run thing. Seconds counted if the Templars were to make it back before the void battle began.

The Unseen would do all they could to misdirect, distract and evade the Imperial Truth and those that brought it. Sigismund charged, the flare of las-blasts deflecting from his armour, sure in his mind that his purpose was to see the

Emperor’s enlightenment delivered or die in the attempt.

‘They deflect and dissemble, or outright to refuse to speak,’ Gidoreas told his primarch as they neared the door to the chamber where the Unseen captives were held.

‘Mauduli is sure they understand her? Her translations are coherent?’

The Huscarl commander stopped with his hand close to the lock controls.

‘Certain.’

‘Very well,’ said Dorn, nodding to the controls. ‘Perhaps I can be more persuasive.’

The reactions of the Unseen when the primarch stepped through the double doors into the suite of rooms set aside for the captives was immediately recognisable. First, there was simple shock. A primarch had a presence beyond sheer size that seemed impossible at first, as though the power of a star had been squeezed into a lumen globe. Next was awe. The Unseen could not avert their eyes, not even blink, as they stared up from the bench on which the four of them sat. Their brains were caught between the evidence of their senses and a deeper, primordial reaction. Finally came aversion. Almost simultaneously they moved their attention away, two of them casting their gaze downward, one giving a gasp and covering his eyes with his hands, the fourth burying her face in the crook of her arm as she almost fell to one side.

Dorn waited patiently, his eyes quickly roving around the chamber before settling again on the prisoners. It had once been an astropath’s quarters, the walls bound with plates that shielded psychic emanations. All implements that might be turned to self-murder had been removed, along with all furnishing but for thin bedrolls and the heavily padded bench. Plates, the food uneaten, sat in one corner by the foot of Lieutenant Patavia, who had stood watch over the Unseen since they had been brought aboard.

They were a rare capture – the first Unseen taken alive. Out of their spectral suits and helms, they looked unremarkable. Outwardly human, fit, clean-shaven with short hair, averaging perhaps thirty Terran years old at most. Their clothes and weapons had been confiscated for study and now they wore serfs' robes in the yellow of the Legion, the belts removed.

After several minutes two of them could glance at the primarch for a few seconds at a time while the others regarded him askance, using their peripheral vision to remain aware of his position.

That was when Rogal Dorn spoke.

'We need to talk to each other.'

He did not raise his voice, but it set the four prisoners quivering, baring their teeth as though in pain. On a stool to one side was the room's other occupant: Mauduli Puntha, one of the iterators that specialised in linguistic assimilation. She was altered by Mechanicum augmentation, one side of her scalp blocky with data-storage devices and implants, allowing her to emulate sounds normally beyond human capacity. Wires protruded from her jaw and throat, a breathing vent fixed to the cheek on the opposite side. The sounds she uttered sounded similar to what Dorn had said, albeit it slower and seemingly with a different weighting on the syllables.

One of the Unseen, a woman whose close-cropped hair was a mix of artificial red and natural blonde, stared at the translator, then at Dorn. She spat a few words to Mauduli, a hand raised towards the primarch as though to ward him away.

'She says they do not treat with invaders,' reported the interpreter. She sighed. 'Not for the first time.'

'Where are you from?' he asked, folding his massive arms. Mauduli translated and waited for the response. When it came, it seemed petulant, as though it were knowledge everyone would know.

‘You have declared war on the Kapikulu Continuum. These stars are ours. Leave them or suffer the consequences like the others.’

The group sat with sullen stares and refused to even speak when Mauduli pressed them further.

‘It is of no matter,’ said Dorn after some thought. ‘We do not need their tongues to learn their secrets, there are other ways to shine a light into the darkness.’

The psyker, Hourtain Thorl, raised a hand bathed in faint golden light. The Kapikulu man in front of him recoiled briefly, sliding along the bench into his neighbour, but did not show any sign of pain or suffering, right until his eyes rolled up and he pitched sideways. The Librarian caught him before his head hit the floor, but Gidoreas could hear that his heart, which in the previous seconds had been almost thrashing in the captive’s chest, had stopped.

The other prisoners screamed and fled, dashing into one of the side rooms with Patavia following with swift strides to ensure they did nothing to harm themselves.

‘Remarkable,’ said Thorl. The Legion’s Chief Librarian cocked his head as he lowered the dead Unseen to the floor. ‘I barely pushed at all.’

Apothecary Vaughnis knelt beside the stricken man, a syringe in his fingers. He inserted the needle into a cordlike blood vessel in the man’s throat, depressing the plunger slowly. Nothing happened. Vaughnis set the syringe aside, his thick fingers moving with delicacy as they prodded and probed the Unseen’s face, neck and elsewhere.

‘Total brain haemorrhage coupled with massive cardiac dysfunction. Simultaneous, I would say. The brain sent a signal to the heart which caused a deadly surge in blood pressure that then killed it.’

‘I thought your genetic analysis proved the Unseen were human, but this is not a natural reaction,’ said Gidoreas. He

glanced towards the ocularum that had been set up next to the door, so that the primarch could observe the proceedings without his overwhelming presence upsetting the captives. Gidoreas felt guilty for the man's death, conscious that it had occurred while he was in direct charge of what took place. He felt entirely inadequate to the task – he was a warrior, not an interrogator – but with the exception of Mauduli, the iterators were being kept away from the prisoners until it was proven they provided no physical or psychic threat.

'Multiple samples and tests confirm that they are human,' replied Vaughnis, standing. He crouched to retrieve his syringe and turned to the Huscarl. 'That does not mean they have not mutated, evolved or been altered in some way.'

'What did you do?' Gidoreas demanded, turning his frustration to the Chief Librarian. 'You said you were getting nothing, no surface thoughts at all.'

'It would appear to be some kind of defence mechanism,' Thorl replied. The doors opened and two of Vaughnis' attendants entered with a casualty gurney.

'The sooner I can examine the interior, the better,' explained the Apothecary. 'I have an area prepared already, sealed away from regular apothecarion duties. Shall I proceed?'

As he asked the question, he glanced towards the ocularum lenses. The vox-bead in Gidoreas' ear hissed into life with his primarch's voice.

'Proceed, Apothecary. Send a replacement to Gidoreas in case further medical attention is required.'

'Yes, Lord Dorn. Parvarion is ready to replace me.'

While the apothecarion team lifted the body to the gurney and strapped it down, Gidoreas stepped closer to Thorl. Over his shaved scalp the psyker wore a tracery of crystalline threads to amplify and focus his powers. The flesh beneath was bluish and the wire seemed to glitter like

ice. The Huscarl could feel a chill in the air, causing discomfort though the physical temperature drop was just a couple of degrees. He disliked psykers intently but knew that they had their role to play.

Hysterical shouting erupted from the side room – a man's voice. Mauduli, who had been sitting across the room away from the Librarian's probing, looked to the Master of the Huscarls.

'I shall speak with them, tell them this was unintended.'

'Yes, do that,' Gidoreas said before returning his attention to Thorl. 'Take me through it again, very precisely. What did you do and what did you detect?'

'I detected nothing passively from them, no sense of thoughts at all,' Thorl replied, his voice deep and slow. 'I can feel the vaguest warmth of their life but nothing like the emanations of a serf or legionary. Less even than a servitor. I allowed my mind to leave its mortal shackle as I would when communing with you or any other, and I set it to alight gently upon the thoughts of the Unseen man. There was nothing to detect, no surface emotion, no idle thought. It would be like sensing the glance of a bird falling upon you from a kilometre away.'

'So you went deeper?' said Gidoreas. '"Barely pushed", you said.'

'As gently as the breath from my lungs pushes the air in front of me, no more than that.' To illustrate his point the Librarian lifted a hand and puffed, a brief cloud of fog forming around his fingers before turning to condensation.

'Yet would you say his death was caused by the intrusion?'

'I don't know how, but yes. The reaction started within milliseconds of me extending my mind. Even you would not have felt my presence in the time his body reacted.'

'A defence mechanism,' Gidoreas repeated. 'But what kind of defence mechanism kills the thing it is trying to protect?'

'Your assumption is incorrect, Gidoreas.' The Huscarl and Librarian turned to the ocularum as Dorn addressed them.

‘The mechanism is not to protect the individual, it is to ensure they cannot betray their companions. It is to protect their society.’

‘He showed no spike in fear response and the others were shocked by the result,’ said Gidoreas. ‘I do not think they were expecting such a dramatic reaction, perhaps they are ignorant of the mechanism too?’

‘An interesting line of enquiry. Have serfs attend the others until they are calm enough for questioning again.’

‘It might prove more fruitful if we interrogate them whilst they are afraid,’ said Gidoreas. ‘They may be more compliant.’

‘A culture that implants a deadly anti-psyker device into its soldiers doesn’t strike me as one whose people will willingly betray their kind. What we need to learn about these people, we cannot drag from them, and it seems we cannot even pluck it from their thoughts. For the moment, treat them as reluctant future citizens of the Imperium. Thorl, attend the Apothecaries with their dissection. There must be some physical reason for your inability to detect their thoughts.’

Gidoreas watched the Librarian leave and waited for the serf attendants sent by Dorn to arrive. He tapped his fingers against each other, agitated.

‘You are frustrated, Gidoreas, because we are being obstructed.’

‘We know the Unseen have taken some of our crews, and though they have not yet managed to seize a legionary alive, it seems likely they will have recovered at least one body for analysis. They must already know far more about the Imperium and our capabilities than we do of theirs. We are at a strategic disadvantage.’

‘Yet we continue to learn. Every battle, every encounter, every obstacle we must overcome teaches us more about the enemy. For example, my Huscarl, we have learned what happens when they are subjected to psychic scanning. To

me that does not seem like a defence, it is a vulnerability. We will find others and, if need be, we will exploit them all until we have fulfilled our mission.'

Rigantis found the situation rather distasteful as he peered into the emptied skull of the Unseen while the Imperial Fists Apothecary, Vaughnis, slipped a number of plastek slides into a projection machine. The smell of sterilising fluids did not quite mask the stale-blood aroma of the corpse, but merely added its own acrid taste. The brain itself along with many other vital parts of the deceased foe had been arranged in metal trays beside the surgical table, all of them with their own incisions and missing pieces. Rigantis wondered what fascinating insights the Apothecary would gain if ever he were allowed to dissect a Novator in their prime.

He looked away from the body parts and his gaze met the blind stare of the astropath Lady Evida Kilnestriskiya. He, engineered with a 'third eye', she sightless from the ritual by which she was bonded with the psychic might of the Emperor. All the way back into the darkest past of humanity, strange powers were associated with sight and eyes. Had those who had originally created the genes that now shaped him deliberately chosen the third eye as a visual reminder of his abilities, or was it an unavoidable necessity of anatomy?

The door hissed open and the primarch entered, Gidoreas following behind. Immediately the room felt too small, the potential of Rogal Dorn pushing at the Navigator's altered perception like a physical pressure. Lady Evida withdrew from his path, but Rigantis forced himself to hold his ground, telling himself a Novator should not be so easily cowed.

Vaughnis turned on the projector, and the white wall at the far end of the sealed apothecarion unit was filled with four images in a square, each a slightly different cross-section of

brain material. At first, Rigantis saw only pale blobs.

‘The white tracery, what is that?’ asked Rogal Dorn before Novator Zuma had even had a chance to examine all four images. A few seconds later, the Navigator saw it too. In the top left pict there was a paler, weblike pattern within the brain structure, alongside and around the blood vessels. In the image to its right the patterning was fainter, barely visible, and it was entirely absent from the bottom two images.

‘That, if you pardon the expression, my lord, is the suspect in our murder,’ replied Vaughnis. ‘This device… Implant? Growth? It caused the haemorrhaging.’

‘For certain?’ Dorn frowned as he peered at the slideshow.

‘Highly likely,’ Vaughnis answered, glancing back at the images. ‘The Unseen was in good health, for a human, and I found no other significant biological differences. I was unable to secure a separate sample of the paler area, so I can’t say if it is biological in origin or not.’

‘Why is it in those parts of the brain but not the others?’ the primarch asked next, pointing to the top images.

‘These are all picts of the same sample of the brain, my lord, captured at different points of time. Fifteen-minute intervals, to be exact.’

‘The webbing disappeared over time,’ explained Thorl. ‘Like it… evaporated. Before it disappeared, I felt a minuscule psychic resonance from it. I don’t want to jump to conclusions, but maybe a similarity with my psychic hood.’

The primarch considered this without comment, simply nodding to show his understanding of the facts. As though all of a sudden he had remembered the others in the chamber, Dorn turned on the Navigator and astropath. His eyes were on Rigantis first.

‘I would not expect you to reveal any information to which you do not think I should be privy, but I must ask if this is something known to the Navis Nobilite? The Unseen, the

Kapikulu Continuum, has a means of travelling vast distances, swiftly and without the Astronomican. Could this modification be the reason?'

'I have not seen its like, lord primarch, nor do I think it would be related,' Rigantis replied without hesitation. He shrugged awkwardly. 'Not in any way that I or my people would understand. My own startling experience with one of the Unseen ships, as I assume was such that I saw, speaks to a very different warp technology. Something beyond the Mechanicum, something held over from the height of the Dark Age.'

'I must answer the same,' added Evida Kilnestriskiya even as the primarch moved his focus to her. 'Those among my order have detected nothing to suggest that the Unseen have a recognisable form of astrotelepathy. They operate across vast distances, with incredible coordination, but it is not by augurs and messages set free across the warp.'

'Yet it is psychic,' said Thorl. 'It blocked my telepathic connection and killed the host when I tried to tap deeper.'

'There is no evidence that the Unseen have displayed individual, or even collective, psychic abilities,' said Evida Kilnestriskiya. 'The Great Crusade has brought us into contact with cultures and technologies far different to our own. The Dark Age of Technology and Old Night gave rise to many oddities we cannot yet explain.'

Dorn grunted, the noise reverberating from the metal surfaces around the clinic chamber.

'One constant we encounter, and which is true in our own history, is that cultures do not develop defences against weapons they do not possess. Offensive tactics and technologies are created or encountered, and countermeasures and counter-tactics evolve to thwart them. Either the Unseen possess psychic potential we have not yet met, they have defended themselves against a psychic foe in the past, or the psychic defence mechanic is an unintended effect of the existence of this brain-network.'

‘Perhaps we should examine one of the Unseen alive, my lord?’ suggested Vaughnis. ‘I believe the disappearance of the material to be related to the tissue death surrounding it. Observing it whilst the host is alive, even if for a short period, could tell us something important. Perhaps we could observe it in action?’

‘You want me to psychically probe one of the captives while you have their head sawn open?’ Thorl seemed taken aback by the idea, which was slightly incongruous to Rigantis, who was well aware of the Librarian’s ability to prise open the minds of others in a less physical way, and much more besides. It seemed a strange detail to be squeamish about.

The primarch shook his head, though for a different reason.

‘I have another plan for the captives,’ he announced. ‘There can be no attempt at peace whilst there exists no dialogue between our cultures. The Unseen – the Kapikulu – consider us the aggressors, but perhaps an act of mercy, to return their own to them, might prove our better intent. The iterators will furnish them with messages and documents that will begin the process.’

‘They wiped out four expeditionary fleets, lord primarch,’ Rigantis said quickly, feeling forced to point out the obvious. He felt fairly safe aboard the *Phalanx*, but he had a great many members of House Zuma spread out through the other fleets. Emotionally and politically, he wanted to avoid their deaths. ‘Why would you be more hopeful that they do not intend the same for us?’

Dorn fixed the Zuma Novator with his powerful stare. Rigantis had looked into the warp with more enthusiasm than he gazed into those stone-coloured eyes.

‘I did not say I was hopeful, but we must always believe diplomacy can succeed. I will be frank, Novator. We have lost the opening stages of this war.’

The primarch paused after this admission, looking to

Gidoreas and then the other legionaries, who seemed shocked at their commander's confession.

'In time, the Imperium *will* be victorious, but to reverse the situation may require a great expenditure of troops and ships. The enemy have a number of advantages over us already, in movement, knowledge and logistics.' The primarch's eyes moved to the slides and then to the Unseen corpse. His tone softened. 'I do not think the answers we seek will be found by studying bodily organs like augurs of ancient times.'

'There is not a soldier or legionary among the expedition that would not give their life for the Imperium,' Gidoreas assured his commander. 'While the enemy remain, we will fight.'

'I already know it, my Huscarl. Our aim is compliance, which does not always demand military supremacy. I would be failing the Emperor and mankind if I did not explore all of the options before me. We have had no communication with the Kapikulu Continuum, our only contacts have been violent. Ultimately, the remaining prisoners may serve our cause better as returned hostages than as a source of intelligence.' Dorn placed a massive hand on Gidoreas' shoulder. 'Even as we hold out one hand in alliance, make no mistake the other shall be a fist ready to strike.'

Dorn's bellicose statement flared in Rigantis' thoughts like a star being birthed, forcing him to look away, no longer able to withstand the beating waves of the primarch's energy. His gaze fell upon the slack face of the Unseen upon the table. So human, yet empty. The eyes were said to hold the truth, but looking into that dead gaze told Rigantis nothing.

Sigismund stepped over his dead companion and took shelter behind an outcrop of rock that jutted from the cliff-edge. Lit by las-fire from turrets above, more yellow-and-black armoured figures advanced through the stark,

strobing shadows across a half-kilometre expanse of bone-white sand. To the right, high winds hurled waves off the rising tide that could wash aside tanks, but along the strip of land between the battering waters and the vertiginous barrier to the interior, the Imperial Fists and the Unseen battled. A kilometre ahead, dug into the rock of the moon, an anti-orbital battery kept the Imperial ships at bay, their tri-barrelled defence lasers silhouetted against a starry, cloudless sky.

System by system the Imperial Fists hunted their foes, but to Sigismund it seemed that they had more chance of caging a shadow than bringing the Unseen to decisive battle. They were everywhere and nowhere.

Occasionally, like now, the Imperial Fists and their Army auxiliaries detected a presence on a moon or asteroid – never a planet – but these were nothing more than supply stations. Most were emptied of useful resources, but a few held promethium-like fuel, lubricants and other materials required to keep the Unseen ships supplied. They were invariably situated in-system, days of travel away from the Mandeville boundary where Imperial ships could enter and leave. Yet the Unseen were capable of coming and going in what seemed like hours, sometimes slipping away scant minutes after being picked up by the surveyors of the Emperor's warships.

Always wary of the trap that had been sprung at the ancient temple, Rogal Dorn's forces could only investigate these cache systems when sufficient forces had been gathered to guard against ambush. Sigismund felt like he was stumbling around the duelling circle blindfolded and weighted down with chains while his enemy was free to move and strike at will.

Despite this, there had been occasions when the enemy had been forced to fight, as much by good fortune as planning. During these skirmishes and boarding actions, the Unseen had changed tactics of late, sacrificing some of

their tactical mobility for heavier weaponry that could take down legionaries. Rogal Dorn had adjusted by sending more Imperial Army units to the hottest systems, trusting to their numbers rather than armour. However, there wasn't an Army unit in existence that could storm a fortress, board a starship or perform an assault drop as well as legionaries, so combined Imperial Fists battle companies waited in support to strike where the baseline humans faltered.

Analysis of their attacks, extrapolation by cogitator and the strategic genius of Rogal Dorn had selected an area roughly one and a half thousand light years across that signified the main zone of operations. A target to aim at. A prize the Unseen might be forced to defend, or sue for peace to protect if it was threatened.

But that was still over three hundred star systems with potentially habitable biospheres.

Like the advance along the beach, it was purposeful, meticulous work to clear every system, patrol behind the fleets, garrison habitable worlds and build astropathic beacon stations to aid communications and navigation. This system had been chosen for the latter, due to its proximity to a number of Unseen ambush sites, but they had discovered the Unseen were already here, though what their high-powered anti-starship laser batteries were protecting was unclear.

'Where is the aerial support?' Sigismund demanded over the vox. Ahead, the turrets and earthworks looked as though they had been extruded from the cliff face, grown out of pale stone rather than built or carved. Projectiles from missile launchers and autocannons snarled and flashed overhead towards the defences, and he waved his squad forwards under their covering fire.

'Interdiction attacks by Unseen fighter cover,' came the reply from the liaison officer in the Imperial Army transport waiting beyond range of the moon's defence lasers.

Sigismund had never met him, but the officer had a calm, quiet manner that gave the welcome impression of dependability. *‘The* Lance of Terra *is too far away to launch fighter screens for our ground attack craft.’*

An orbital and aerial combat drop had been ruled out due to the formidable weapon systems protecting the clifftop, which meant taking the fortress from below. The tide was narrowing the field of battle every minute that passed, forcing the Templars and their supporting squads closer and closer to the cliff face. Sigismund, charged with leading the small force of fifty legionaries, faced a choice: wait for air support that was probably not coming or make a final push into the undamaged guns of the Unseen?

He started forward again, his war plate compensating for the extra weight of the jump pack on his back. The Imperial Fists’ heavy weapons fired again, missile trails and tracers cutting across the face of the bunker complex, erupting across the walls and gun turrets in bursts of shrapnel and flame. Despite the suppressive effect, volleys of returning las-fire were cutting down legionaries all along the shoreline. Unless they wanted to advance into a crossfire, the nearest guns had to be taken out.

‘Jump assault, full charge, target the closest cannon bays,’ snapped Sigismund, increasing his pace. Red and blue beams slashed back and forth around him, turning sand to glass, leaving welts of bubbling ceramite across the attacking legionaries’ battleplate.

He jumped and at the apex of the arc fired the boosters of his pack, launching nearly fifty metres up and a hundred metres forward. He almost fell short, boots crashing on top of the narrow parapet he’d aimed for, the slender barrel of a lascannon just to his right. The gun was open-backed, two Unseen in padded armour crewing it. No fancy lights, no shadow play here. Launching himself from the pit wall, he cut them both down with a single chainsword sweep.

With a crash of heavy boots, Baudelard landed behind him,

a plasma pistol in one hand, chainsword in the other. He fired once, turning the gun controls to slag and vapour.

'In or out, sergeant?' asked the Templar, helmeted head turning towards the doorway behind the gun and then to the balcony-like emplacement about thirty metres above.

'The quickest way, of course,' replied Sigismund. He jumped to the embrasure wall and fired his pack as he kicked away from the cliff face, sending him skyward like a rocket. His ascent brought him over the lip of the next gun position, but the crew had already abandoned their weapon. Below, other Imperial Fists squads were advancing towards the main gate, their heavy weapons targeting the defence weapons on the further side.

'Sergeant Sigismund.' The liaison officer's vox arrived just as Sigismund was placing a melta charge on the sealed doors to the accessway behind the gun. *'Our astropaths have just interpreted a new signal from the* Phalanx*, priority orders.'*

Sigismund set the timer for three seconds and withdrew behind the blast shield of the lascannon on its turntable.

'How high priority? We are fighting down here.'

'Apologies, but the astropaths say the message was transmitted with the highest possible urgency. For immediate action. We are no longer to raise an astropathic relay station. You are to return to the Herald of Dawn *as flagship of a re-formed pioneer fleet. The primarch is bringing back all the scouting flotillas for a different kind of offensive. The new orders are to leave the system with forces intact.'*

The melta charge incinerated the door lock – and much of the right-hand door – the blast flinging open what was left of the reinforced barrier to reveal an unlit, circular tunnel beyond, the walls glistening slightly in the light from outside. Sigismund recognised the signs of recent laser mining. The whole facility was no more than days old. Perhaps its entire purpose was simply to draw attention,

rather than actually protecting a strategic system. From the vox reports, his warriors were all poised to breach the stronghold itself.

What was the point? What was his purpose?

The mission had been revoked.

He glanced back at the roar of jump pack jets. Two Templars – Jaxon and Heos – alighted on the gun platform. Their chainswords were whirring, bolt pistols at the ready.

If he had to hunt down every last Unseen across every world in three hundred star systems, and it took a century or more to do it, that was Sigismund's purpose.

'With me,' he told his companions, ducking into the passageway while he activated the command vox-channel. The new orders said *with forces intact.* For Sigismund that meant not leaving a foe to strike at his back. 'All squads, converge on the defence lasers. Kill everything inside.'

'This isn't the first time the universe has come close to killing me since I moved to the Seventh Legion, but I think this is my last recording. Jezat's teeth, I didn't even think I would be alive now! I have no idea if anyone will listen to this. Maybe you're one of the Unseen, right? Do you understand this? I hope you all die! Every last one of you sneaky bastards can fall into a star for all that I care.

'Right, not helpful at all.

'Let's start again.

'I am Laurentius val de Meer, of the remembrancer corps, currently aboard the Seventh Legion vessel Hope's Oblivion*. We are currently trying to get back to the main expeditionary fleet but have taken serious battle damage in two encounters with the Unseen. We got three of theirs, but that doesn't seem to put them off any more.*

'Emperor of Terra, they followed us through a warp jump! When they started attacking ships in transit, I thought perhaps it was luck, opportunistic. The same ships attacked us in two star systems thirty light years apart. Even so, our

Navigator, Benjamus Hid Aleen of House Alosa, said that there was no pursuit. He watched, waited to see a translation bubble but there wasn't one.

'If they chased us one way as we headed out towards the rim of the Occluda Noctis, what's to stop the Unseen following us back in?

'Rogal Dorn sent us, sent a dozen ships, to make contact with the other expeditionary fleets. To find one of his brothers. Maybe one of the others got past, but I don't see how. Certainly nothing's coming in. If Horus or the Lion or Fulgrim have sent anyone to check on our progress, they didn't reach the Seventh. Maybe they'll act on that. Could be powering their way into the Eclipsis as I store these words. The Eclipsis is what the Navigators have started calling this region. They've had nothing of the Astronomican for a while, but this place seems to be the deepest part of the region shadowed by the Northern Major Warp Storm.

'The thing is, Rogal Dorn sent out the ships, fast ones, to bring word to his brothers to warn them, not to ask for help.

'We'll be translating back into realspace in a few minutes. Benjamus has been trying to evade any pursuit and he has been switching streams and throwing us into currents and vortices, apparently, and won't have any idea where we are until we break warp again. But the idea is that the Unseen won't have a clue, either. It might work, but I'm not hopeful.

'I…

'I'm a coward.

'I thought this would be my chance to get out of the night, away from the darkness. By the Throne, I've been in the vanguard since the beginning, I've seen what's happening. There have been some close calls, let me tell you. This was the closest though. We lost artificial environment and gravity for ten minutes. I almost suffocated to death

floating above my own cot. The blast doors had sealed the corridor outside.

'I'm not getting out though, am I? Maybe none of us will. I can't stop thinking about those earlier fleets. Lost in the night. Gone. Nothing left. Damn, but we haven't seen anything of them either. No wrecks, prisoners – not a single scrap of evidence that tens of thousands of men and women lost their lives in this abyss.

'The only way to survive now is strength in numbers, watching each other's backs. Like their soldiers, their ships are hit-and-run, their armour crumples as soon as they take a solid broadside. So, they've been reluctant to attack groups of half a dozen and more vessels, even though clearly they could outnumber us if they wanted to.

'The only thing that stops me just getting a pistol and making it quick is the knowledge that Rogal Dorn leads us. At every stage there has been a plan, a shift, that brilliant mind of his piecing together each shred of information, every morsel of intelligence.

'Unless one of the other primarchs arrives to aid us, the only way out of this darkness is through *the Unseen. Defeat them and we get out.*

'I trust, I still believe, that Rogal Dorn can do that.'

Gidoreas knew better than to think Rogal Dorn had run out of ideas, but the primarch was certainly taking time to allow the fleets to regroup and his own strategy to percolate. The Unseen seemed to be everywhere even though there was no sign at all of one of their worlds. Given that they attacked almost at will in locations hundreds of light years apart, it seemed impossible to the Master of the Huscarls that the Imperial expedition had not yet encountered any settlement bigger than a moon station or orbital base. Gidoreas had ventured a theory that the Unseen possessed no planets, existing entirely as nomadic system drifters. Dorn, while accepting anything was

possible, had noted that even if that was the case, the volume of ships and crew so far encountered still required supplies and support far exceeding anything the VII had yet discovered.

Fearing he had missed some vital piece of intelligence or fragment of knowledge, the primarch had brought the fleets back to a few musters, each numbering scores of ships to discourage Unseen attack. He had spent forty days going over scan records, communications logs, interviewing specialists from all areas of the expedition. There was no indication that he had yet found what he was searching for, but he also exuded the same calm but determined aura, no sign of impatience or desperation.

A few of Gidoreas' subordinates had brought up the subject of the ships that had been despatched to the other Legions. The outward reason had been to take warning of the Unseen, to let the other primarchs know what they might run into as they started their inward advances. But, combined with the pause and regrouping of the fleets, it could look as though Lord Dorn had stopped and was waiting for one of his brothers to bring assistance.

Gidoreas had dealt with these doubters by lecturing them on their unworthiness to fight as Huscarls, sending half a dozen back to the tactical companies as punishment. He would brook no undermining of the primarch's command.

Even so, there would be others, especially those outside the Legion, that were thinking the same: fleetmasters and colonels who felt lost, surrounded and out of their depth. If the primarch did not give them something to anchor their hopes on soon, there would be morale problems throughout the Imperial Army and the support flotillas. Perhaps even desertions.

The prospect of losing even more strength from the fleet dragged at Gidoreas' thoughts as he escorted the Mechanicum logistaria delegation from the strategium deck and returned to Rogal Dorn, just as Novator Zuma

arrived in answer to the primarch's summons. The lead Navigator looked corpse-white, his skin tight against the bones, eyes – natural eyes – sunken and ringed with darkness. Gone were the leggings and elaborate slashed-sleeved coats, replaced by a light shirt under a loose purple gown with a high collar, and a dark red skullcap that covered scalp and forehead.

'What do you see, Novator Zuma?' Dorn asked, waving a hand towards the hololith, above which was suspended a projection of thousands of star systems, the encounters with the Unseen placed across them in red symbols.

'That your assertion that the Unseen home world must be somewhere in the central three hundred systems was largely correct,' replied the Novator. His strange, extra-jointed fingers twitched as though they plied a keypad as he extended a hand towards the projection. 'From the chronology and concentrations, the more we move north-east, the more the Unseen attack us. But we have only cleared a tenth of those systems so far.'

'Where would you go next?' Gidoreas asked, joining them. 'Based on what you have observed of the warp conditions in the surrounding systems.'

'It would be a guess, nothing more, and so quite without merit,' said the Navigator. 'We can highlight systems of Unseen interest, we can see the common routes and transit points, but they do not use the…'

The Zuma Novator trailed off, eyes gazing deep into the cluster of floating light and dark. Gidoreas opened his mouth to ask a question, but a raised hand from Dorn stopped him. The primarch and Huscarl waited for a minute and more while the head of House Zuma stared at the holo-map, eyes flicking ever so slightly from one point to another.

'Here.' Dorn pointed at a particular star, right in the heart of the contact symbols. 'This is the area of heaviest traffic.'

Zuma examined the data points and shook his head.

‘They pass through, they do not converge, as one might expect of a planet. I don’t believe you will find a world there, but perhaps something of worth. A warp gate perhaps.’

‘A warp gate?’ Gidoreas looked at his lord and then Novator Zuma. ‘What do you mean?’

‘A theory, nothing more at the moment,’ confessed Zuma. ‘Yet the theory also ties with some of the oldest records of our Houses.’

Dorn tapped at the controls and shifted the projection, examining it from a perpendicular angle as he spoke.

‘It is beyond our current artifice, but it is said that during the height of the Terran empire of the Dark Age, humanity possessed the ability to build warp gates,’ said the primarch. ‘Each formed a stable anchoring point in a network of artificially created channels. If you think of the natural currents of the warp like a river, bending and flowing as nature dictates, a warp channel – that is the warp space stretch between two aligned warp gates – is more like a canal. Tamed, navigable. Slower than going downstream but faster than struggling upstream.’

He pointed to various lines of attacks, and Gidoreas pictured their sequence bearing in mind the chrono-stamped details of each ambush and defence. There did seem to be a greater movement along three separate but distinct pathways.

‘You say that the gates are at each end of the channel?’ The Huscarl glanced at his commander, who studied the oblate sphere of sparkling systems with unblinking eyes. ‘Why not move our fleet to one of the gate systems rather than where they cross?’

‘We already have sent ships to those places,’ said Dorn quietly. ‘System scans and Navigator reports make no mention of any anomaly or structure that might be a warp gate. I assume, Novator Zuma, that such a thing would be recognisable.’

‘Even if the gate itself were not, the effect on the warp might be visible to my people. We do not yet know how, but the Unseen, maybe with the aid of hidden gates, can travel through the warp in a different way to our ships. When I saw them, they were like ghosts, not fully within the same realm. Speaking to others who have survived warp encounters with the Unseen, the similarities are there. I cannot say for sure we would be able to detect the gates or the channels except by luck.’

‘An unreliable strategy at the best of times,’ said Gidoreas.

‘These are not the best of times, but we also do not need to depend upon fortune.’ Rogal Dorn had the mien of a man that had made a decision. Arms folded, he looked at Gidoreas and then the Navigator, and then back to his Master of Huscarls. ‘The former strategy was working but we were too spread out, vulnerable to the mobile attacks of the enemy. We have not found a target that we can attack, so we shall reverse the dynamic and see if the Unseen can be tempted into a decisive battle as attackers. We shall concentrate our force here.’ A finger thrust into the display at the crossing point of the Unseen movements. ‘From there we will send out fleets into the surrounding systems. Nightcastle, I shall name it. A keep from which we will secure the lands about and sally forth to harry the foe. The closer our attacks come to a target of value, the greater the response will be from the Unseen. Where they fight hardest, we push even harder ourselves, with Nightcastle to act as anchor and support. As we get closer to one of their worlds, they must either respond to the threat or we will find what we seek.’

‘You are hoping to spur them into attacking the *Phalanx*,’ said Gidoreas, with a moment of insight. ‘You want us to mount a threat so great that the Unseen must come for us?’

‘And that does not require us to have an exact target, just to be where the Unseen would rather we were not. There is also another purpose. Every day brings one or more of my

brothers closer to the inner sphere of the Occluda Noctis. Every day the Unseen are focused upon *us* is a day that they cannot spare ships for protecting other borders, patrolling other systems.'

'What if Horus or Fulgrim, or even the Lion, were to discover one of these Kapikulu Continuum worlds first, lord primarch?' Zuma showed distaste at the prospect, and it was several seconds until Gidoreas realised that future pacts and wealth for his House might be lost in such an event.

'Novator Zuma, we fight for the whole Night Crusade, for the expansion of the Imperium.' Dorn shut down the projector, and the command dais was suddenly dim and grey. 'The success of my brothers is also our success.'

The Novator absorbed this with a reluctant, curt nod.

'I shall pass on messages to my kin and our allies, to forego no effort in uncovering one of these warp gates.'

'I will have Thorl and the others of the Librarium assist in any way they can. They may not have the third eye of a Navigator, but their warp senses and yours may find us a solution.'

'Librarian Thorl is welcome to my pilaster, lord primarch,' the Navigator said stiffly. 'With suitable notice, of course.'

Pounding along the course of an ancient riverbed, the Huscarls kept up a relentless storm of combi-bolter and reaper fire. Overhead, the Stormbirds and Thunderhawks that had dropped them screamed back towards the void to provide cover for the three dozen ships of the Imperial Fists fleet fighting to keep twice their number of Unseen transports out of orbit.

Ahead the Unseen fell back from the onslaught, barely able to mount any kind of defence against the overwhelming force of Rogal Dorn and his companions. At his side, Gidoreas smiled inside his helm, filled with a simple joy of combat he had not experienced since the

teleport attack against the Unseen warship many months before. It gladdened his heart further to see his primarch in battle, exhorting his Huscarls to press on, his bellowed commands a stark contrast to the calm demeanour he displayed when strategising.

Along the high banks of the riverbed, nearly fifty metres above Gidoreas' head, tanks of the VII Legion rumbled forward in support. The Unseen had vehicles of their own: black-and-grey-hulled armoured cars and dual-turreted tanks that spat multi-laser and lascannon shots at the Predators, Vindicators and Land Raiders advancing alongside the infantry assault.

The Unseen had been busy in the system designated to become Nightcastle. The stronghold ahead was one of their largest constructions, but it was one of dozens that now protected the system. As the greater part of the expedition had advanced closer and closer, the enemy had been fortifying, choosing to defend something of importance, in vindication of the primarch's choice.

There would be time enough to find out what they sought to protect. For the moment Dorn and his sons were focused on cleansing the Unseen from every world, satellite, planetoid and deep void station they possessed. In the fashion that typified his approach to all problems of war, Rogal Dorn had chosen the most heavily defended site for the first attack. The plan was to sweep away the defenders of the network of strongholds on the desert-like eighth world and to expand from there, eliminating all Unseen presence.

The enemy had reacted with far more vehemence and far more swiftly than Gidoreas had expected. Dozens of ships had arrived within days of the first Imperial vessels breaking warp, but he suspected his primarch had hoped to garner such a rapid and decisive response.

So it was that for the first time since encountering the Unseen, just over twenty-one thousand legionaries had

been assembled in one armada. Five thousand more crewed the ships above and the attack craft that were spearing back towards their orbital duels. It represented over a third of the VII's remaining strength, and if the battle went badly, it would surely bode torrid times ahead for the expedition and the Legion itself.

With Dorn beside him and his brothers around him, Gidoreas entertained only thoughts of victory, burying the imagined ignominy of the Imperial Fists having to be rescued by another Legion. The Unseen had slipped and slid their way from battle to battle for too long, but they had not been able to hold back the ire of the Emperor's servants. Lord Dorn had judged right. They needed to keep their blade at the enemy's face, to force them to fight, and in doing so the superiority of the Emperor's warriors and their allies would prevail.

A kilometre ahead, the outer bastions of the citadel reared over the riverbanks, their upper guns opening fire as the Imperial forces came within range. Bolts of cerulean light flared down from the gun towers, joining the flurries of las-beams from the retreating armoured columns. Triangular-winged single-pilot craft soared and swooped overhead, dropping not explosives but tech-breaking haywire charges. Tanks and war plate alike seized and sparked within the pulses of discharging energy, opening gaps in the Imperial Fists' line as vehicles and squads were immobilised, the remaining armour and legionaries urged on by Dorn to maintain pace rather than formation.

The wilderness immediately about the towers and their parent keep, near lifeless even before bombardment, was a desolate wasteland of fused glass and craters, though much of the fortifications remained intact, layers of power fields visible as a bluish shimmer. Here, the riverbed and the banks became indistinguishable, both pounded into a ruck of crevasses, plasma-fused dunes and dust-filled craters. Pale grit and ash coated the yellow of the Imperial Fists as

they pursued the Unseen into the swirling cloud of debris left by the orbital attack that had finished just minutes before.

More than anything, it lifted Gidoreas' spirits to be active, attacking the enemy after so much time manoeuvring and positioning. He did not doubt the time had been properly spent by his lord, who like a champion in the ring had measured his opponent in every way possible before deciding where to land the opening blow. But to shoot at the clusters of figures ahead, and soon to cut at them with the lightning-edged blade in his hand, offered a release of the frustration that had come before.

Dorn was still in command: directing the fire of heavy weapons squads; broadcasting alterations to the attack plan for the armour captains; responding to the stream of reports from orbit. But now he was his other self, the warrior that none could stand against, destroyer of foes, bane of cities. This was his element, the heat of battle. No hololith, no strategium, just his immeasurable mind churning through the mass of data, charting a path to victory amidst the churning anarchy of battle.

Secondary guns added their rage to the storm of light that screeched and cracked into the tide of the Emperor's VII. Rapid-fire energy blasts left streaks of molten ceramite across the armour of the Huscarls, but the heavy-gauge alloys beneath remained strong. Dorn himself ran through the blitz of fire without heeding it, a golden giant surrounded by a rainbow aura of dissipating light. In their wake a hundred companies of legionaries burst along the riverbed in an ochre flood.

'For nearly a year I have commanded my sons, my Huscarl,' rumbled Dorn. 'Today I lead them!'

'And in following you we are united in fulfilment, my lord!' Gidoreas replied.

When they were not yet half a kilometre from the outer towers, the Master of the Huscarls spied the greater part of

the fortress, growing out of the dust and grit on a rise of land around which the riverbed half curved like a moat. It was the same colour as its surroundings, a dull greyish white, and like the towers might well have been built of the stuff the tanks and legionaries were ploughing through, compacted to a material as hard as stone.

There were two sets of gates, through which hundreds of Unseen now withdrew, their tanks and other armour forming a ring of rearguard beneath the guns of the outer bastions. Wall guns on the central fortress turned their lasers from chasing gunships across the heavens to the whirling dust storm that was the Imperial Fists' armoured advance. The air was so thick with particulate matter it acted like a shield, deflecting the laser beams, turning bolts that could punch through battle tanks into fragmentary, kaleidoscopic sprays.

The commander within the fortress was evidently of cautious disposition and before the lascannons, autocannons and whirlwind launchers of the VII Legion came within effective range, the massive gates of the Kapikulu stronghold swung shut. A last few dozen infantry surged through the closing gaps, but scores were left outside, turning like hunted beasts finally brought to bay. Against the might of Spartans and Land Raiders, Mastodons and Behemoth-class siege walkers, even the remaining heavy weapons scattered through the Unseen infantry had as much impact as throwing stones against power armour.

Yet none knew better than Rogal Dorn and his sons that tanks alone will never seize a fortress. While the armoured columns split to encircle the Unseen position, their guns ripping at the parapets and gates of the main keep and the four boundary towers, the primarch and his Huscarls arrived amid the last remnants of the enemy army. With them strode Leviathan Siege Dreadnoughts, their gate-breakers and wall-tearing weapons primed for the assault.

Dorn’s chainsword was a terror to the foe that were trapped against the walls of their own stronghold, striking them down in pairs and trios with each sweep of its snarling teeth. A few steps behind, Gidoreas found barely an enemy left alive for his power sword. Around them the Huscarls’ guns had fallen silent: power axes, gloves and swords preferred at close quarters; thunder hammers and chainfists reaping vengeance for ten thousand dead battle-brothers and a quarter of a million Imperial Army soldiers.

At last the golden blade at the forefront of the Imperial Fists infantry came before the gates, all enemy eyes and guns upon them. Now, amid the bright fury and deafening noise of the Unseen defiance, the fatal blow was about to land.

The noise of the earthgrinders changed from a deep rumble to a higher-pitched snarl as the body of the Termite transport burst through the foundations of the Unseen citadel. The Terrax-pattern assault drill tore itself clear of the last clinging clods, crashing down to the horizontal as its weight finally crossed the tipping point. Four more whirring tooth-nosed vehicles ripped up from below, their spinning earthgrinders turning Unseen defenders to bloody pulp, crushing others beneath their bulk.

Sergeant Sigismund was one of the first out, bolt pistol cutting down foes, chainsword ready to greet any that eluded his masterful aim. The Templars streamed forth, a hundred in all, while the ground shuddered as a sixth vehicle erupted through the floor of a neighbouring hall, a massive Hellbore tunneller carrying Master Aeolus and another fifty of the company. It crashed through the adjoining wall, multi-launchers scything frag missiles through the shocked defenders, heavy bolter sponsons coughing explosive rounds.

After travelling fifteen kilometres underground, to come up within twenty metres of their attack coordinates was

testament to the skill of the Imperial Fists and the rigour of their planning. Surprise was total.

Forming up around their master, the Templars headed towards the gates.

‘I am still alive, thankfully, though somewhat shocked to discover that the sanctuary I thought we would find with the Phalanx *is anything but. It was impossible to reach anyone else and we turned back, our Navigator and astropath combining their talents to seek out the lord primarch’s flagship through the stillness of the Occluda Noctis.*

‘And on our arrival, we find a star system that goes not more than five days without battle of some kind. While the Imperial Army and the Seventh Legion continue to fortify the system, and warfleets thrust out into the neighbouring systems according to Lord Dorn’s plans, the Unseen are not idle. Sometimes they probe, on other occasions they come in force. Void battles and ground attacks, stealthy invasions, counter-orbital attack runs, and every manner of skirmish and duel takes place on a regular basis. Every day, the lord primarch issues fresh orders, moving materiel, warriors and ships, reinforcing some sectors and weakening others, sending out escorts to protect supply convoys coming in from the worlds of the Triumvirate of Garl and the Damareen – ancient foes now united beneath the banner of the Imperium.

‘Forgive my earlier lack of character. The warp, the constant fear of death… I am not of the Legiones Astartes. I am made of less stern stuff than I imagined. Yet I find a new hope even amid the carnage of Nightcastle’s constant war. There is purpose here. I no longer catch myself staring into the dark wondering what it conceals. Rogal Dorn has slowly but surely dragged the denizens of the night into the day, and now we can look upon them and know that one day we can be victorious.

‘But until that day, I foresee there will be much more fighting and dying by both sides.’

The *Phalanx* formed the core of Nightcastle, but it was not always involved in the fighting, and nor was the primarch. Over the months since first securing the system, he had changed flagship four times depending on the situation and his need. It looked as though Gidoreas’ master was much energised by this activity, more confident in his overall strategy, allowing him to focus on specific areas.

The primarch had insisted that the change of perspective was essential to unravelling the secret of the Unseen’s warp travel capabilities. Hence, he was currently aboard the light cruiser *Veritas Insignum* with a squadron of frigates on patrol close to the system’s third planet.

‘They are too reluctant to attack the *Phalanx* or even our battleships,’ Dorn explained.

The strategium of the *Veritas Insignum* was a tenth the size of the command hall of the *Phalanx* and made to feel all the smaller by the presence of the primarch. Lieutenant Vastacruz, commander of the vessel, listened attentively to his lord’s words while half a dozen legionaries and twice that number of servitors monitored the ship’s systems at a row of databanks on the deck in front of the command dais. The light cruiser did not possess a powerful enough hololith to display a full system map, and so the primarch had to keep adjusting the controls, sweeping their viewpoint through the three-dimensional representation like a gunship.

‘They appear and disappear outside of sensor range, but they cannot be hidden within the system.’ Dorn tapped at the runekeys and the display spun a hundred and eighty degrees, looking out from the star towards the *Phalanx* on the orbital path of the seventh world. Patrol lines criss-crossed the view, looping around the system. The primarch continued, although it seemed to Gidoreas that he was

speaking more to himself than his officers, eyes fixed on the schematic, using their presence as a means to vocalise and process his thoughts. ‘They have no permanent bases. They could be bringing in supply runs between our patrols, but we have been varying timings, routes and patrol strength as a matter of routine. There seems to be no pattern for their raids, but when they attack in strength, their fleet gathers somewhere between the sixth and seventh body orbital paths.’

‘That would mean their warp gates, if that is their route of entry, are located somewhere in the inner system,’ said Vastacruz. All officers within the Legion and the upper ranks of the Imperial Army had been briefed to seek any anomaly or phenomenon in realspace or the warp, but as yet nothing had given away the secret of the Unseen. Even within a single system it would take years to scan every square kilometre of void.

‘It would seem so,’ replied Dorn, turning his head towards the lieutenant. ‘However, if you had a secret means to enter and leave the system, your first consideration would be to maintain that secrecy. The Unseen go to great lengths to conceal their approach and muster routes, and that suggests the warp gates, assuming they exist, are located out-system from the seventh orbital path. Much closer to the star than the Mandeville boundary that restricts us, but not so far in-system that they can be easily surrounded.’

The primarch cut the projection but remained staring into the space it had occupied for several more seconds.

‘Assumptions are not enough. I need proof.’

It was another four days aboard the *Veritas Insignum* before the opportunity to gather that proof arrived. Gidoreas was roused from the chamber he shared with Vastacruz and two of the other crew by the blaring of the general quarters alarm, just an hour after finishing his watch. He had rested in his armour – all of Nightcastle was

designated a battlezone – and so pounded along the corridors to the command deck as quickly as possible.

He came to the strategium to find it a hub of activity, Lord Dorn at the dais snapping orders to the engines, weapons and shields officers. There was no hololith running for Gidoreas to check the immediate situation, but he found Lieutenant Vastacruz monitoring the surveyor screens just in front of the primarch. Looking past his fellow Imperial Fist, he saw that the light cruiser was accelerating hard, away from the inner orbits, with three of the destroyers keeping pace. The other was fading from the sensor sweep.

'An Unseen attack has been engaged in sector eighty-four,' the primarch told Gidoreas as he looked back towards his commander, his question unasked. 'Looking at their past manoeuvres it was one of five routes I expected them to use, and now we shall see. I have left the destroyer *Cockatrix* to act as a rearguard, of a sort. As we move to the attack, the Unseen will break away, outgunned by our arrival – but the presence of the *Cockatrix* will hamper their attempts to disengage in-system. We shall see if they would rather be trapped and destroyed than run directly towards one of their warp gates.'

Gidoreas watched the sensor screen over the following minutes, keen to see how the situation would unfold. The Unseen flotilla was typical of one of their recon forces: a single capital ship equivalent in firepower to an Imperial cruiser, with between three and six smaller escorts, in this case a trio of smaller vessels. Currently they were on a course to intercept an Imperial Army squadron of frigates, but three Lunar-class cruisers were mobilising from the outer system to join the battle. According to previous doctrine, the *Veritas Insignum* would have been under orders to continue its prior course, not to be lured away by what could easily prove to be a diversionary attack. Only by being here, with the ships, was the primarch able to countermand his own standing orders and respond in

timely fashion. Had fresh orders been relayed through the usual channels, the Unseen would have time to attack the frigates and evade the cruiser squadron, proving nothing.

By Rogal Dorn's assessment, if the warp gate was truly in the inner system, the Unseen would break off before the arrival of the *Veritas Insignum* and head on a vector towards the system boundary that took them away from the incoming cruisers – they would not be willing to head directly for their exit jump with the *Cockatrix* on station to shadow them. Conversely, if the jump point was out-system from the battle, they would risk breaking past the light cruiser and escorts in an attempt to lead them away from it, before eventually looping back once they were beyond the range of the Imperial surveyors.

The minutes crawled past as the scene played out on the scanning display, the four components of the coming battle coming together in a manner that Dorn had both predicted and now depended upon to make his judgement. Every ten seconds the surveyors updated, the runes moving closer and closer, save for the single return of the *Cockatrix*, which seemed so unimportant – a single destroyer among the hundreds of ships marshalled in Nightcastle – yet was key to the primarch's intent.

Rather than turn towards the Lunar-class squadron, which would have been their closest allies, the Imperial Army frigates changed heading to close the distance to the *Veritas Insignum*. Gidoreas realised that this too was part of the pattern Dorn had woven, without having to issue a single order to the other ships. He understood intimately how every component of his forces would react in any given situation – had the squadron been a different class of vessels, or Legion-crewed, the primarch's approach would have been adapted to account for that.

'Enemy ships will have their range on the frigates in thirty seconds, lord primarch,' Vastacruz announced. The lasers of the Unseen outranged Imperial equivalents by nearly

twenty-five per cent, a factor that had counted hard against the expedition in many previous battles.

Dorn nodded silently, one fist in the palm of his other hand, as solid as the stanchions that held up the strategium ceiling.

Fifteen seconds passed.

'Transfer surveyor display to the main hololith, lieutenant.' Dorn stepped back from the controls and allowed the ship's commander to do as he had asked. The projector stuttered into life, bringing the two-dimensional surveyor reports into three-dimensional reality.

'They're turning, commander,' the legionary at the scanning console next to Gidoreas announced. The Huscarl had taken his eyes off the screen in the seconds of transference and the main display took three seconds to update before it was relating data in real time.

On the hololith, the Unseen had aborted their attack run on the frigates and changed heading towards the light cruiser and its escorts.

'All gunnery teams, prepare to engage,' ordered Vastacruz, before glancing at Dorn. 'With your permission, lord primarch?'

'You have my full confidence to conduct this battle as you see fit, commander,' he replied. 'Proceed.'

Vastacruz rattled off more orders, some of them broadcast to the destroyers, which accelerated past the light cruiser and took up position ahead, torpedo tubes loaded. The Unseen flotilla did the opposite, with its smaller escorts dropping back, preparing to move around a flank of the coming battle to pick at their foe with their dorsal lance turrets.

As was so often the case in battle, patient waiting turned to hectic activity in a matter of minutes. The void shield generators crackled into life, bathing the *Veritas Insignum* with their protective layer, even as the destroyers fired their first salvo of torpedoes. The void missiles were not

likely to hit at this range – the Unseen ships were manoeuvrable enough to avoid them – but the angle of firing forced the enemy to approach the Imperial squadron from the flank, into the strength of the light cruiser's broadside. The *Veritas Insignum* added its own torpedoes thirty seconds later, further forcing the enemy to adjust their heading.

Scarlet beams pulsed from bow turrets on the heaviest Unseen ship, met by the purplish blue flare of void shields. Their first salvo had been directed at the engines, a common Unseen tactic, but they would need more firepower to overload the void shields.

Vastacruz moved and spoke at ease now, oblivious to the primarch standing just a few metres behind him. He ordered the destroyer squadron, their torpedoes now reloaded, to cut their speed hard and come across behind the *Veritas Insignum* so that they would meet the enemy as they passed along the port side.

A red-robed Mechanicum priest entered the strategium and walked to the shields console, one metal hand moving with impossible speed across the controls. Gidoreas could see flashing red reflected from metal beneath the adept's cowl.

His first thought was for the safety of the primarch. A light cruiser was far more vulnerable to a lucky hit, its void shields lacking the redundancy of larger vessels. Compared to the *Phalanx*, it was like going against a warship with a canoe.

The dorsal cannon opened fire at the same time as the port batteries, causing the whole vessel to rumble, prow to aft, its structure reverberating to the thunderous outpouring of high-explosive shells. The void around the Unseen capital ship turned to brief flame, its shields burning white as they absorbed the energy and shrapnel of the detonations.

More laser fire sprang back, both from the prow and the

spine of the passing Unseen ship, joined by more from the escorts as they came over the top of the enemy light cruiser. Warning sirens shrieked as the void shields overloaded, replaced by the banal mechanical tones of damage-control servitors announcing breaches in the lower gun deck and aft hull.

The *Veritas Insignum* roared its reply, while on the hololith the torpedo launches of the destroyers blinked into life.

At such relatively close range, the Unseen could not avoid all of the warheads, which turned into blossoms of deadly plasma as they erupted along the slate-grey hull of the ship, exploding within its shields. A whole third of its flank briefly became slag, armour sloughing away like an old skin, debris and the corpses of crew spilling out into the void through the grievous wound.

'Cease firing, commander.'

Rogal Dorn's calm voice cut through the noise of the strategium. Vastacruz turned to his primarch, confusion scored across his features.

'We almost have them crippled, my lord!'

'I don't want them dead, I want them running wounded.'

'Yes, my lord. My apologies for my outburst.'

'Understandable, commander. Be content that you have served your purpose well and though the enemy escapes, this is a victory for the expedition.'

The primarch raised a hand to the hololith and indicated the Unseen ships powering away from the Imperial squadron, making little attempt to distance themselves from the *Cockatrix*. Outgunned, the destroyer started to move from their path.

'We cannot say for sure that the enemy have a warp gate, but if they do, I know how and where to start looking for it.'

'Are you sure we're looking in the right place?' There was nothing on the shuttle's crude scanner and Rigantis glared over his shoulder at Thorl, who filled most of the small

transport in his Tactical Dreadnought armour. The fact that the Librarian had chosen to wear one of the toughest, largest suits of war plate in the Legiones Astartes armoury did not fill him with confidence for his own survival.

'Yes,' the Imperial Fist replied. He carried a massive crystal-headed axe that took up what little remained of the passenger compartment, though Rigantis would have been in the small control pod regardless of his companion's wargear – the armaglass dome gave him an almost complete all-round view; only the crew compartment and engine block created a conical blind space to the rear. 'It'll be ahead, if anywhere. Trust Lord Dorn.'

Rigantis peered out through the dome to the empty spread of stars ahead. This was where the primarch had sent them, though the bulk of the attacks by the Unseen had come from the opposite side of the expeditionary fleet.

'I trust his calculations, of course,' said the Navigator. He thought he saw something to the right; with the frilled cuff of his shirt sleeve he revealed it to be a smear on the reinforced glass. He would have felt ludicrous had he not been so afraid. 'Everything he says makes sense. I saw the schematics, this does seem to be an origin point for the Unseen movement in this system. I have two concerns. Firstly, the assumption that the Unseen have a single origin point. There was a fair bit of extrapolation to reach that conclusion. And if we do assume that to be the case, I do not believe that you and I will somehow see the warp gate.'

'The warp gate was your theory,' Thorl reminded him with a chuckle. 'If you're going to spin a hypothesis to the primarch, you have to be ready to take the consequences.'

'I wasn't planning to wager my life, the survival of the fleet and possibly the success of the whole Night Crusade on proof of concept.'

'The presumption seems logical,' Thorl continued. 'Whether a gate or some unique engine or even some breed of psyker we've never encountered, the Unseen are using

the warp, just in a different way. The warp is the same warp I can tap into, and you can see. It might not be the visible burst of an Imperial warp engine, but at some point there has to be an opening between realspace and the immaterium, and one of us should be able to sense it.'

'Yes, yes, but applying logic to the warp is usually a misstep to disaster.'

They fell quiet, as they had been for most of the previous day and a half. Quite how Rogal Dorn had known the massive attack was coming was beyond Rigantis, but its arrival added credence to the rest of the plan. With so many ships heading in-system, it should be easier to find where and how the Unseen were travelling and either use it, destroy it or guard it.

Ten minutes passed before Thorl broke the silence with a terse whisper.

'Something's coming. Faint. Not like the bow wave of a ship.'

He spoke of his warp sense, capable of detecting disturbances in the immaterium, even the wake of an incoming ship. Dorn asserted that sufficiently large movements of the Unseen had to leave a register somehow, even if far reduced from the signature of Imperial vessels.

'Ahead?' said the Navigator.

'I'm a psyker, not a surveyor, you should know that relative dimensions mean nothing in the warp.'

'I was… Never mind.'

Rigantis glanced at the transport's rudimentary scanning array. Behind them, nearly three hundred thousand kilometres away, a welter of signals from an erupting battle overwhelmed the surveyors. There was nothing ahead.

'It's like a hissing in my head,' growled Thorl. 'Like wind over sand.'

The inside of the transport was pitch black so that no reflection was cast onto the piloting dome, but Rigantis heard the thrum and creak of Thorl's armour as the

Librarian shifted his weight. Except for the distant stars, the void was empty, but it was not Rigantis' natural gaze that would trap the Unseen. He pulled off his shieldcap and let his third eye stare into the emptiness.

There was nothing to see, though the sensation for Rigantis was of a scene that was back-lit – the bright warp essence of Thorl was strong enough to cast a reflection across realspace as well as the immaterium. Just as he would plumb the roiling energy waves of warp space, so Rigantis let his warp-sight drift without conscious effort, seeing if it was drawn to any particular place.

The emptiness was unnerving, adding to the background dread that had permeated Rigantis' being since the shuttle had been ejected from a hold aboard the *Bladeborn* and deposited a few thousand kilometres from their current position. The frigate had then carried on through the patrol route Dorn had established over the previous twenty days. One would have called it paranoia, the meticulous attention to every facet of the operation, but the primarch left nothing to chance or oversight. If the Unseen had been watching for changes of behaviour while the fleet had shifted itself into a more vulnerable position, there would be nothing to draw attention to Rigantis' little transport. Barring anything remarkable happening, it would be three more days until the *Bladeborn*'s route looped back and they could be retrieved.

The Zuma Novator felt something touch upon his warp-sight.

A vibration, as though he were a spider on a web, and something had landed on one of the strands.

'Oh shit… I think the primarch was right.'

He shifted focus, metaphorically narrowing his third eye. To the left and down a little. Another tickle, another itch, right where he was looking.

'I feel them, but I see nothing,' he croaked, mouth dry in the recycled air, throat tight with anxiety. 'I need your

help.’

‘How?’ The mass of the Terminator suit, the static and ozone of its systems, loomed close behind Rigantis. ‘What do you need?’

‘Direction,’ said Rigantis. ‘But it may be dangerous, for both of us. I need your warp sense to guide my third eye. We could be looking for a ripple on an ocean. Have you ever delved into the mind of a Navigator while they looked upon the warp?’

Thorl said nothing for several seconds, likely weighing up the risks. The gaze of a Navigator’s third eye brought insanity and death, would it be the same to look *through* it?

‘Let’s do it,’ grunted the Imperial Fist.

A massive hand held the Novator’s shoulder, far gentler than he expected. There was a feathery touch at the edge of Rigantis’ awareness. He tried to ignore it, using his third eye to peel apart the layers of realspace, his mind suddenly flooded with the memory of the slices of brain taken from the Unseen captive.

‘I see it,’ whispered Thorl. His voice already trembled with strain. ‘I see your thoughts. I share your sight.’

Rigantis had an urge to look further to the left. For a moment he tried to fight the instinct, but it became more insistent, and he submitted himself to its barely conscious demand. His gaze traversing the stars, it was in the traversal that he caught a glimpse of something not right, like a sudden movement in his peripheral vision. The urging – it had to be Thorl’s mind – sent his third eye upward and then down to the right, like an augur-bearer attempting to triangulate a reading.

Each time he shifted his warp-gaze, Rigantis thought he detected something where he had been looking a split second before.

‘I can feel them.’ Thorl’s voice was faint even though he was right behind the Navigator. ‘Not their ships, but their minds. The absence of their minds, like a cold pool amid

steam.’

Stars rippled in and out of focus. Rigantis concentrated, closing his real eyes, shutting down all other senses except for the one he needed, and for several seconds it felt as though he floated in nothing, silence all around.

He saw the ripples and turned all effort to the centre, their origin. Rainbow colours. Warp sign.

‘I feel it,’ said Thorl, his satisfaction like backwash that flowed into Rigantis’ thoughts. ‘I feel it!’

Rigantis was buoyed by secondary emotion and a moment later he sensed something as well – a great weight hanging on reality like water on a sheet, threatening to burst through. Ships gathering, just beyond the veil of unreality. A space beyond realspace, between it and the warp.

‘I still can’t see a gate or mechanism,’ he said quietly. ‘It must be within warp space itself.’

‘Nightcastle Prime, this is Librarius Alpha.’ Rigantis hadn’t seen Thorl activate the long-range vox. The transmission would give away their position as surely as activating the engines. ‘Enemy incursion detected. Transmitting attack coordinates.’

While the message was coded into the Imperial cipher, the comms system beeping and whirring in response, the flicker of energy in Rigantis’ thoughts flared. Not the great dazzle of a false star like a translating warp engine, more like a sliver of light streaming through a door ajar. Rigantis could see nothing with his normal sight, but in his third eye the portal resolved into being, an oval at least four or five kilometres across and two kilometres high as clear as a full moon on a cloudless night.

Dark shapes briefly appeared silhouetted against the light and then disappeared, swiftly replaced by more.

‘Seventeen, eighteen… nineteen…’ Thorl counted aloud each Unseen vessel that broke through. Some were small, two-hundred-metre-long skiffs; others were mighty double-hulled battle cruisers. ‘Forty-one, forty-two.’

The scanner was alive with the signals, many of them coming straight towards the unshielded, unarmed transport.

'Sixty-one… sixty-two, sixty-three… Blood of the primarch, there's more still!'

Projected routes had the majority of the enemy ships passing about thirty thousand kilometres to port as they headed directly towards the *Phalanx* and the embattled fleet. But two ships, both light cruiser-sized according to the primitive surveyor, were sweeping wider, like outriders on a convoy. Their route took them less than a hundred kilometres from the Navigator and Librarian. In void terms that was the same as being right on top of the shuttle.

'Total, eighty-four.' Thorl released Rigantis' shoulder and stepped back.

'Kill the comms,' snapped Rigantis, realising the link was still open. Let's hope our transmission was lost in the background wash. If they detect us, we can't fight and we can't outrun them.'

Thorl shut down the transmitter and receiver, turning the transport back into an inert lump of metal and plastek. 'The shuttle is less than twenty metres long, it might not even show up on the Unseen's scans.'

That was Rigantis' hope as the Unseen light cruisers continued onwards. They would pass abreast to the shuttle and most Unseen ships had the majority of their main weapons prow-mounted, but they were meant for engaging far larger targets than the transport. Their secondary cannons were quite capable of blowing the craft apart with a single hit. With a major battle spreading out across the system, what commander would bother diverting their attention for such a thing?

'Just a piece of rock, nothing worth your time,' muttered Rigantis, hands gripping the edge of the control panel. 'A little piece of asteroid just minding its own business, move along.'

He heard Thorl's chuckle again but didn't share the legionary's humour. The nearest Unseen ship was now visible as a shooting star, a glint that moved across the glass dome from the right. Rigantis' eyes flicked between that spark and the readings on the surveyor. The tiny machine mind controlling the basic suite of sensors had nothing that would detect any oncoming counter-augur or any kind of weaponry lock.

Given the Unseen's favour for laser weaponry, it was likely they would be dead before their brains even registered the flash of firing.

The bluish spark drifted to port, diminishing with distance.

Still Rigantis watched, expecting a tiny blip on the surveyor as an attack craft raced towards them, launched as an aside to the main offensive.

Nothing on the scope. Nothing through the viewing pod.

'They've gone,' said Thorl. 'They didn't see us.'

Rigantis held the breath in his chest for a few more seconds before letting it slowly out through pursed lips.

'Now what?' he said.

'The *Bladeborn* should come back for us.'

'Assuming it survives the battle.'

'Assuming anyone survives the battle. Dorn will send someone else.'

Rigantis thought about this for a little while. Thorl's armour had its own air processors, so he would certainly outlast the Navigator if they ended up stranded.

'I don't think anyone will pay attention to our engine signature now,' the Navigator suggested.

'We should remain where the primarch positioned us. If we move, nobody will know where to find us.'

'We can make ourselves known, if needed.' Rigantis tapped a control and a smudge of light from the control panel lit his hand as he pointed out of the dome, back towards the Unseen jump point. Thorl had freed the psychic binding and no longer shared the Navigator's third

eye. ‘There’s something like a bruise on reality. The gate has not closed. Or, perhaps, the lock has not been turned. Choose your own analogy.’

‘More ships might come through,’ said the Librarian, leaning into the cramped space of the pilot dome, eyes following his gesture.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps.’ Rigantis thought about the fleet, the massive battle that would claim thousands of lives over the coming hours. Although helpless, he and Thorl were the safest craft in the system at that moment. Thoughts of keeping the situation that way nagged at the Navigator but he pushed them down, knowing there was no real safety, no victory, no great success for his House until the Unseen were destroyed or compliant.

He turned to the massive, armoured figure, one hand moving to the engine controls.

‘Shall we take a closer look?’

If Gidoreas had not known better, it would have looked as though Rogal Dorn were deliberately manoeuvring the fleet into a bad position. The second Unseen fleet, the one that the Novator and Chief Librarian had sent warning about, was approaching at speed. Their course would bring them into close contact almost directly opposite where the initial Unseen attack had struck. It would have been a classic pincer movement except that the first Unseen ships were breaking away before the second fleet entered engagement range. Rather than engaging the VII Legion and their allies from two directions, they were planning something else. Despite this, Dorn had ordered a third of the Imperial ships to break away and pursue the withdrawing Unseen – those that had attacked first – leaving the enemy a route towards the *Phalanx* if they desired it.

The Master of the Huscarls said nothing but watched the strategium displays intently, eyes moving from one hololith to another, switching between detailed views of the stern

chase and the incoming attack, and a wide-area schematic that showed an overall picture of the component fleets. The comms-net was busy with several squadron and capital ship commanders requesting orders to intercept the newly arrived Unseen. Gidoreas looked to Dorn for the response.

'No new orders,' the primarch said quietly, studying a data-slate in his hand. At least five minutes had passed since he had looked up at the main strategic display. Occasionally his finger would manipulate something and the green underlighting his face would flicker briefly.

The Unseen's greatest threat was in the first attack pass, when their concentration of prow weapons outranged the broadside and dorsal batteries of most Imperial ships. Torpedo and gunship sorties could be used to disrupt their attack runs, but after months and months of war those resources were running low. When the expedition vessels came into range, the Unseen would break away, readying for another run. And again, and again, wearing down the fleet's assets.

'My lord, torpedo tubes five through nine are loaded and ready to fire,' Gidoreas told his primarch, although he was sure the notification would have been heard by Dorn already. 'Nova cannon targeting for dispersal bombardment has been calculated.'

'No firing, Gidoreas. Not yet.'

Still the Imperial Fists' gene-father had not looked up. The Huscarls captain knew his primarch was aware of what was happening; he could sense the change in stance, the subtle expressions of his battle persona. Rogal Dorn was undisturbed, but he was far from relaxed. Even so, he seemed too calm. Gidoreas remembered the precision of the primarch's plans when they had been aboard the *Veritas Insignum*, but his instincts were roaring at him, too much to ignore.

'Lord Dorn, the enemy will be within attack range in three minutes.' He forced himself to speak in a measured tone,

trying to imbue himself with the same aura of control that surrounded his commander. ‘Our support flotillas will not be able to manoeuvre in time to intercede if you do not give the order now.’

Another glance at the displays confirmed to Gidoreas that the Imperial fleet was breaking into three distinct sections, with only a handful of small escorts able to respond to the threat of the Unseen.

‘I’m going to recall the second battle line, my lord,’ announced Gidoreas, coming to a decision.

Dorn looked up from the data-slate, his eyes fixing Gidoreas like a graviton beam.

‘You will not. All ships to continue with their issued orders.’

‘The *Phalanx* is a powerful vessel, my lord, but the risk is too great. I know you have a plan, Lord Dorn, but the threat to our command headquarters and to you is not worth whatever gain you think we will make.’

‘Who are you to make such a claim?’ Dorn’s question was sharp, but he did not seem angered.

‘Your Huscarl, my lord. It is my duty to protect you.’

‘Do you wish me to relieve you of that duty?’

The question shocked Gidoreas, silencing him for several seconds. Before he could say anything further, the primarch continued, speaking just as surveyor banks in the main strategium started wailing their detection of enemy lock-on signals, which Dorn seemed to ignore.

‘You swore oaths to obey orders. If I were to order you not to protect me, what would you do?’

‘What I thought was right at the time.’

Dorn straightened, brow furrowed, jaw tightening.

‘Right? Do you mean correct, or *righteous?* You may feel righteous preserving my life, but it may not be the correct thing to do. Is my life more important than the will of the Emperor?’

Gidoreas hesitated, not wanting to engage with his

master’s debate. He knew that everyone – every servant of the Emperor – was a life to be spent to further the Emperor’s plan, but the thought of the primarch dying was the closest he came to feeling fear.

‘It is not an intellectual exercise, my lord. The threat is real.’

‘I am in command, my Huscarl.’

Gidoreas wanted to turn and issue the order, but the gaze of his lord kept him fixed in place more solidly than a stasis grenade. A second later, sirens shrieked into life and comms-servitors barked out attack warnings.

More than two dozen Unseen ships were in range, their laser cannons sending beams of destructive light flickering across the vacuum of space. Void shields flared, though the blast shutters were down across the strategium and Gidoreas could see nothing beyond the visual displays of the tactical vid-feeds. Flashes of red and clouds of purple and blue. More enemy ships peeled away to target a few of the nearest escorts but were content to duel at long range with the destroyers and frigates.

The *Phalanx*’s nova cannon turrets opened fire, hurling their massive shells out to near light speed. Milliseconds later miniature suns exploded amidst the Unseen attackers. The vox was alive again, this time with incoming warnings from the pursuit squadrons. Gidoreas took in the situation with a glance at the main projection. The first Unseen were doubling back, daring the guns of their pursuers to cut through to the *Phalanx*. Within twenty minutes the vessel would be surrounded by more than fifty enemy ships of light cruiser mass and larger, while the Imperial fleet would be helpless to intervene. They would stay at distance, having foregone any attempts at boarding since their first fact-finding missions and the primarch’s teleport attack.

‘My lord?’ Gidoreas had no more words to express the instincts that raged inside him. Why did his primarch seem so fixated on using the *Phalanx* as bait? What was to be

gained?

Dorn moved across the command deck, fingers tapping at the data-slate.

'Comms, new orders to the fleet.' He pressed the transmit rune and the main display lit up with preloaded trajectories, some of them criss-crossing with such complexity that Gidoreas could not quite tease them apart from a distance – just a mess of overlapping blue lines. 'Transmit strategic package Prime One. Immediate effect.'

Red hazard lumens were lighting up the void shield status boards, and Gidoreas manipulated a sub-display control to bring up a projection of the *Phalanx*'s damage control systems. There were voices all around now as officers spoke to their divisions and relayed information from one part of the vessel to another, while teams of tech-priests blurted and crackled binharic to one another.

Five void shield generators had overloaded so far, and the reactors were reaching close to one hundred per cent capacity as some of the *Phalanx*'s other weapon systems came online. Dozens of turrets aligned on their targets and opened fire, laser and plasma, barrages of high-velocity shells flaring out to meet the incoming Unseen vessels.

There was damage to the hull as well, though no serious breaches. Doors had sealed and fire control teams were handling any spread of flames. Dozens of casualties were being reported and the Apothecaries were already registering more dead. But for what?

Gidoreas studied the main schematic again. The Imperial pursuit fleet's orders were not to turn after the first Unseen fleet, but to curve around behind the second attack, cutting them off from the point at which they had entered the system. The initial enemy fleet's presumed warp origin was likewise guarded now by a sizeable Imperial force, while dozens of ships were heading back towards the *Phalanx* in a ring-like formation that would cut off the Unseen at closer quarters.

‘Now the truth shall reveal itself to us, and with it the correctness of my reasoning,’ Dorn said softly, coming up beside Gidoreas as he analysed the fleet movements. ‘If the Unseen prognosticators do not see the inherent threat to their position and their warp exits, or they decide the loss of a large number of ships is worth disabling the *Phalanx*, then I will have erred.’

It was such an understated review of the situation. If the Unseen pressed their attack, the *Phalanx* would be badly crippled at best, and quite possibly destroyed.

‘You baited them, but are using the threat of the springing trap to save the bait.’ Gidoreas looked up at his primarch’s impassive face. ‘To what end, my lord? What do we gain by taking such a huge risk?’

‘Even whilst on defence we must advance our plan and hinder the enemy. It is not enough to know that they entered through a predicted point, my Huscarl. Now we will see if they must leave by the same location.’

‘If they don’t, my lord?’

‘Then I am left with a mystery. If they could attack and leave almost at will, why have they not assembled all of their ships – for we have seen evidence of hundreds of vessels – and wiped us out? What prevents them striking that killing blow? I think their gates are fixed, and the coming minutes will prove it so. There is also another weakness to their gate jumps.’

‘Capacity,’ said Gidoreas. ‘This is their largest attack yet, but it is a relative fraction of their total fleet strength.’

‘Precisely, my Huscarl. Imperial ships are at the whim of the warp when they travel, but if a fleet can remain coherent, it is entirely possible to assemble an armada such as we have here at Nightcastle in a matter of hours. Why can the Unseen not do the same? Their warp gates, or however they traverse the immaterium, must have a much more finite capacity. And I think we will discover shortly they are also limited in where they can be exited and

entered. Should that be true, we can find their gates and guard them. The course of this war will change in our favour.'

'If we are not destroyed,' Gidoreas added, but his master's surety had alleviated any genuine concern. The primarch did not gamble, and certainly would never take an undue risk with an asset as powerful as the *Phalanx*. The Master of the Huscarls felt a surge of shame at his earlier worry. 'Forgive me, Lord Dorn, for my unseemly actions. Your thinking is always a level beyond my own, it is the limits of my own understanding that cause me doubts that I cannot shake. I am still at a loss. Why not blockade their exit routes more thoroughly? If you had moved our ships earlier, we would be better positioned to intercept the enemy as they try to withdraw.'

'The greatest intelligence loses much of its value if the enemy believe you possess it. They change their plans.'

'So we have to threaten to cut off their retreat, without looking like we are doing it deliberately…'

'Though I have total trust in my subcommanders, I could not risk revealing my intent in case of pre-emptive action by them. I require the Unseen to witness precisely what I desire them to witness. Nothing else will do.'

Gidoreas watched the intertwining lines of travel for the Imperial ships and the projected course routes as the Unseen changed their direction and formations in response. Had they suspected they were going to be trapped, they would not have taken the bait. Had the bait been anything less than the *Phalanx* itself, they may not have been so fully committed. Had they the smallest suspicion that their warp gates had been detected by the Navigator-Librarian teams positioned across the system, they would have broken away. And, most importantly, if the Unseen came to realise the depth of this subterfuge, they would follow through the attack, hoping to salvage the death of the *Phalanx* from the fires of their lost advantage.

Fine margins for error, if any. As Dorn had claimed, just one ship too close to a warp gate or pulling back early may have pushed the Unseen into a decision before all was in place. Even so, with every consideration taken into account, despite the massive stakes being risked, Gidoreas realised that at no point had Rogal Dorn considered any of his plan to be a gamble.

'It was more of an idea than a plan!' snapped Rigantis, firing the thrusters that would bring the transport to a stop about twelve thousand kilometres away from the psychic half-smudge he thought of as the Unseen warp gate. With Thorl's power blending into him again, the Navigator could see the turmoil beyond the portalspace. A growing potential, a pregnancy of psychic mass awaiting actuality.

More Unseen ships that would shortly arrive at the gate.

'We have to warn the fleet,' said Thorl, his other hand extending to the comms transmitter. 'They're out of position to respond to another fleet from this vector.'

'No!' Rigantis' hand moved of its own accord, sliding across the communicator controls to lock them a second before Thorl's armoured finger touched the numeral pad to punch in the channel. 'There are a dozen Unseen ships bearing down on us from the battle, they will pick up a transmission in moments. And if one of the ships in the gate comes through, we will be dead in seconds.'

'An acceptable consequence,' said the Imperial Fist. He carefully but firmly moved Rigantis' hand aside, ready to activate the comm again.

'Not to me,' growled Rigantis, slipping his hand beneath the armoured gauntlet of his companion to shut down the screen once more.

'I could crush every bone in that hand with ease,' rumbled the massive warrior. His eyes gleamed gold and crackles of ice formed on his face and scalp. 'Or snap your arm off at the elbow. Or pull the whole arm from the shoulder.'

‘Or shut the gate?’ gasped the Navigator, resisting the urge to turn round and focus his third eye on the legionary. He wasn’t entirely sure what would happen if he looked into the Librarian’s opening mind but was fairly certain neither of them would walk away from the encounter sane, even if still alive.

‘What?’ Thorl’s psychic presence receded, though a glimmer of it remained like a haze in the air around Rigantis.

‘The warp gate isn’t a physical thing in our universe or in the immaterium. It *is* the warp. Look at it.’

Rigantis focused his third eye on the smudge, resolving it into half a dozen concentric circles slowly rotating in different directions, both around their own centres but also through the third axis.

‘It’s a lock,’ said Thorl.

Rigantis realised what he meant – the circles seemed to be rotating and sliding into some kind of pattern. Unrecognisable symbols blazed into being around their edges in some places, like coordinates or weapon locks being verified.

‘That explains why we found nothing after the Unseen left. The portal bends the energy of the warp itself,’ continued Thorl.

‘Can you bend it back, that’s the pertinent question? Can you extend your power while we are conjoined?’

‘This may hurt.’

‘Wh–’

Like a spear being thrust into his thoughts, Thorl pushed his mind into Rigantis’, channelling psychic power out through his third eye. The Navigator’s brow, his whole head, felt like it was on fire, spreading along his nervous system, his heart responding with triple-beats, blood rushing, arms and legs tingling.

Out into the breach flowed their combined essences, detached but for a tendril of Thorl’s mind linking them back

to their corporeal forms. They were not in the warp, but they were of it, existing at the boundary like the gate. Rigantis thought he caught glimpses of a cannon-studded prow just beyond the threshold of the portal.

They're coming through.

It was his thought, but not, shared with the Librarian at the moment of conception, even as his observation had been known to Thorl.

The Imperial Fist's mind appeared like a golden shimmer, seizing upon one of the spinning sigil-wheels. Sparks fountained, immaterial but bright, as though metal placed against a whetstone, the sensation that cut through Rigantis' thoughts a mental version of the shriek of the contact.

The wheel slowed and then accelerated, breaking away from the psychic grasp of the pair. All but two of the circles were aligned now, the blazing union almost too blinding for Rigantis to behold. Thorl tried again, but the wheel was skewing around its circumference too rapidly to grasp.

Forming a golden ring against the stars, the warp gate opened.

Almost instantly, the slender prow of the lead Unseen ship nosed through, cannons bristling within the curve of armoured plates. Rigantis felt a shudder of sensation as his mind and body were reunited.

'We have to warn the fleet!' grunted the Zuma Novator.

'Better to stop the enemy,' Thorl replied, sending their psychic presence flowing out once more. He tried again to affect the warp gate, this time trying to prise apart two of the immaterial rings that made up the golden spheres.

Try harder.

Rigantis could not tell if the thought was his or Thorl's but tried to apply himself to the task, imagining he could influence the turning wheels.

The Navigator knew that if the ship made it through the gate, he would die. There was no chance the shuttle would

avoid detection this close to the portal. It was a powerful motivator. With him the future of his House, his legacy for future generations of Zuma would die too. Desperate, wishing he had psychic potential of his own to add rather than simply guiding Thorl's, he allowed the gaze of his third eye to roam. He did not move a muscle, but on reflex he inverted his focus, as though looking inside his own head, seeing the presence of the Librarian there, seeing himself in the Librarian's thoughts.

The feedback ripped a scream from his lips and a roar from Thorl, and they almost lost their pairing. A sudden burst of warp energy rippled out from the transport, coruscating through both realspace and the immaterial realm.

The expanding sphere of psychic dissonance hit the warp lock and Unseen ship at the same time. The latter was rocked sideways as its winglike dorsal superstructure passed out of the gateway. The former erupted into gold and black sparks with a thunder that could split worlds. The lock-circles buckled, straining against their own tension, and then broke free, spinning away from each other, gaining incredible speed in an instant.

The gate closed.

The collapse of the controlled rift slashed the Unseen ship in half. The energy of its reactor detonation expanded outwards a fraction of a second behind the warp resonance of the tortured gate. The immaterial shock hit Rigantis-Thorl like a wall of fire through their minds, blinding and purging, tossing them together in a maelstrom of invisible but excruciating forces. The physical blast hit the transport amid a welter of lightning, hurling the small craft from the detonating gateway. Rigantis' last, fragmentary sense was of being thrown into the armaglass canopy a moment before it shattered around him.

Continued attacks by the Unseen shattered any notion

Gidoreas had harboured that, following the discovery of their warp gates at Nightcastle, the war would swiftly be over. As before, the expedition had been arranged into several large battlefleets, each fully capable of occupying or devastating a Kapikulu world should they encounter it. As Rogal Dorn had surmised, the Unseen had difficulty bringing large numbers of ships and troops through their gate system, making it hard for them to respond to unexpected movements by a sizeable fleet.

On the other hand, progress was as slow as at any point prior to the Nightcastle strategy, the Legion investigating system by system, warp jumps limited to a few light years at a time to keep the ships together. The Unseen had already shown themselves willing to attack vanguard flotillas, patrols and errant vessels if they came across them.

The *Phalanx*'s surveyors, in union with those of investigatory escort ships being sent out beyond the system, showed a widening picture of the Continuum's territory. A combination of astronomical observation and warp divination by the Librarium had highlighted which of the three hundred identified systems containing potentially life-bearing worlds was most likely to harbour sentient species. Given the prevalence of the Unseen, and no evidence to the contrary that the Kapikulu Continuum was a single-species civilisation, it was highly probable that any advanced society would belong to the Unseen.

Over the previous four systems, the methodology had been refined into several distinct phases. The first ships to break warp were the most vulnerable and stayed closed to the Mandeville point if necessary, or moved to muster together as soon as it was viable. Only when at least three or more capital ships were in-system were probing squadrons sent out to extend the reach of the surveyor network.

It was a tense time, not knowing whether an Unseen fleet was already in the system or if enemy ships were nearby

and able to respond before the bulk of the Imperial forces arrived. Of the last four jumps, two had encountered significant resistance in the opening phase, and the Unseen had only been driven back after severe escalation of battle by the arrival of Imperial Army ships of the line and Legion battle-barges.

Once a fleet was gathered and the absence of any Unseen world established, a decision had to be made regarding any potential warp gates in the system. Dorn, in consultation with the Navigators, was certain that there was some limit to the realspace distance between warp gates. This meant the Unseen needed to traverse empty systems as part of longer journeys. Finding them was still an uncertain task, especially if the Unseen were not present or withdrew through their gates whilst outside the range of sensor readings. In the previous system, Navigators on arriving ships had been fortunate enough to sight a secondary warp effect from the gate's activation whilst on the warp-space side of the portal, but that was just as unreliable as sending out teams of Navigators and Librarians to sweep a system from realspace.

It was all tedious but fraught with peril. Every system held the potential of victory and yet might harbour an Unseen fleet capable of seriously damaging the expedition. Nobody was ready to forget the four fleets that had already been lost among these uncharted stars. Also, too many losses to the Librarium and Navigator pool would have just as profound consequences for the Imperial effort as the loss of a system's warp gates might have for the Unseen.

All of which must have been occupying the primarch's thoughts as he watched the middle stages of the dance unfold again. So far there was no sign the Unseen had ever been here, but the Imperial Fists had been taught to be thorough in everything they did, never making assumptions when evidence could be gathered instead.

'Why do they continue to fight, my lord?' he asked his

commander. ‘They must understand that they cannot win. Time, if nothing else, will bring us to their worlds.’

They were together on the command deck following translation into the fifth system since the breakthrough at Nightcastle.

‘Their leaders will be asking the same questions of us,’ Dorn said, his sudden words catching Gidoreas unawares; he had thought the primarch too occupied to address his comment. ‘They would say, “Why do they persist in this costly blind groping into our domain? Why are this Emperor and his lackeys so determined to attack us?” The enemy do not comprehend the size of the Imperium, the scope of our purpose, and still hope to outlast us. In their circumstance, would you give up because the war is hard, my Huscarl?’

‘No, my lord, I would fight to the last beat of my hearts and the last breath in my lungs,’ Gidoreas replied.

‘As it should be. Remember always the purpose, whatever it may be, and continue to strive towards its achievement. If one fails, it cannot be for lack of effort.’

‘As taxing as these labours are, we can take heart that our victory is inevitable,’ said Gidoreas, but the moment the words left his lips he realised his error. Before he could correct himself, the primarch’s scowl and stare had him fixed in place.

‘The Emperor’s victory is inevitable, ours is not,’ rumbled Dorn. He looked away, fingers flexing, forming fists at his side and then relaxing. ‘We can die and yet achieve victory.’

‘You have concerns, my lord.’

‘Of course I do, Gidoreas,’ the primarch replied quietly. ‘A fool believes himself infallible.’

‘You are not a fool, my lord. You are the greatest general of the Emperor.’

‘Do not be so certain, there is stiff competition in that regard. Perhaps even as we speak the Lion toasts Horus and Fulgrim for their victory in the ruins of an Unseen

system. There is the possibility that I was wrong, that my desire to push direct to the heart of the Occluda Noctis was pride, or stubbornness, or contrariness. The Lion irked me, that may have influenced my thinking, to prove him wrong. Some of the generals and admirals among our allies argue that we should use the opportunity we have created to break out from these benighted systems and unite with one of the other Legions.'

Gidoreas was about to say something in defence of his gene-father but was stopped by a raised hand and a slight shake of the head.

'I know you would defend my honour with your life, master of my Huscarls, as surely as Master Aeolus, but you do not have to guard it against my own doubts. It is not weakness nor paranoia to be aware of the potential for personal failure. There is also an argument that what we have learned here might be of use to my brothers if they face similar struggles.' Dorn relaxed a little as he turned away, once again watching the runes spreading out across the map of the star system. 'I have a graver concern than the potential waste of effort and loss of reputation. I am uncertain what the Kapikulu Continuum is trying to achieve.'

'To protect their worlds from us, my lord.' Gidoreas felt uncomfortable pointing out the obvious to his master, but perhaps he was being too simple.

'That is their aim, their desire, but how are they adapting their strategy? War is as much about movement and logistics as it is bolters and shields. They do not move like we move, they do not see the void and the spaces between as we do. We have tried to learn from them, but few are captured, and they tell us nothing.'

Gidoreas recalled many speeches and conversations with Rogal Dorn that said the same thing but at length and more eloquently. 'Are we not supposed to be focused upon our own intent?'

The primarch smiled but there was little humour in him, nor had there been for some time.

'We are, and it is the contemplation of what that means that gives me pause. Again, I must consider whether my persistence in trying to locate the Unseen alone is maintenance of my objective or hubris.'

'Hubris? It would be vain to abandon all that we have so far achieved, and would make mockery of the sacrifice of many thousands dead of both sides. You said that now is not the time to give up.'

'I would not abandon our cause, but we cannot allow what has come before to chain us to one possible future. It is a fallacy to think that because something came at great cost, it must therefore have value.' He sighed, head tilting to gaze across the strategium, at nothing in particular. 'I know that there is optimism following the events at Nightcastle, but over the greater span of time we have learnt and achieved very little for our efforts. What would we lose by withdrawing and reconsidering our options?'

Now it was Gidoreas who had no immediate answer. It seemed inconceivable that his primarch was guilty of the lapses he suggested, and equally he could not say without reservation that the campaign had achieved any lasting victory so far.

'I shall take your silence as your answer.'

Sigismund enjoyed the silence inside the Temple of the *Phalanx* and was glad that he had not been among those of its protectors dispatched into one of the other battle groups. A Templar carried his duty with him, and sometimes protecting the Temple meant fighting a foe very distant from it, but he was at his most peaceful when within its walls, training alone.

The sword cut the air as a silver blur, following the shapes already written into Sigismund's thoughts. He appreciated the solitude of lone practice, but it provided no challenge. A

matter of knowing his own form, striking foes that were conjured from his experiences, parrying and blocking attacks that were of his own devising. Useful, for he knew his own weaknesses best and how to exploit them, but ultimately an imitation of the ring of metal on metal, mind against mind that was at the core of true combat.

He stopped as he heard the familiar tread of Appius coming through the door behind him.

'May I?' the weapons master asked. Sigismund turned and nodded without comment.

They duelled, Appius with a double-edged sword in one hand and an armoured gauntlet-buckler in the other. Already loosened up, Sigismund pressed hard, but could not manoeuvre his foe into a weak position. Appius was trying to get in close to use the heavy glove as a weapon rather than defence, but Sigismund would not allow it.

'You look irritated,' said Appius, the air filled with the clang of metal as his sword-edge turned aside a thrust from Sigismund. 'And you lack aggression.'

'The Night Crusade has halted again,' said Sigismund, shifting his stance to try a few low, sweeping attacks. Appius dodged or blocked them in turn.

'Bored?'

'No.' Appius was trying to distract him with questions, to put him off guard or unbalance his thoughts.

'It would be understandable.' Appius counter-attacked suddenly, pushing aside Sigismund's blade, his roundhouse punch with the heavy glove missing the Templar's jaw by the slightest of margins as he jerked his head back.

'I am frustrated by our lack of progress.'

'I see,' said Appius, grabbing his longsword by the blade and swinging it like a club, forcing Sigismund back two steps. 'Cease!'

The Templar stopped mid-stroke, the blow aimed at Appius' midriff.

'I have you beaten,' said Sigismund.

Appius ignored him and walked away, stepping out of the circle of cinders. He hung up his weapons at the rack and used a towel to wipe off the thick layer of waxy sweat that slicked his taut muscles.

'Attack me,' said the weapons master, arms folded across his chest.

'I can't,' replied Sigismund. He indicated the edge of the fighting circle with the point of his blade.

'A good point. Get ready for our next duel, in that case.'

'I *am* ready,' growled Sigismund, impatience finally burning through his usual reserve. 'It is you that are not ready.'

'I know exactly what I am going to do,' said Appius, unmoving. 'What is your plan? How are you going to beat me? What techniques and stances will you employ?'

'How should I know, you have no weapons yet!' Sigismund relaxed, lowering his sword to his side, feet coming closer together.

'For the last months, Lord Dorn has used our attacks and the strength of the Unseen defence to gauge progress and estimate where they are most determined to defend and where they are happy to give ground.'

'Yes, it is a clever approach. A foe defends their most valuable location most strongly. That guides the next attack.'

'Why don't you attack me? What is your plan?' Appius asked again.

'How does one form intent without knowing their foe's armaments, their positioning?' As the words left his tongue, Sigismund heard them as though from Appius. He stepped backwards to the other side of the circle and raised the sword crosspiece to his brow in salute. 'The lesson is learnt. The Unseen have withdrawn altogether, either to frustrate our efforts, or to directly defend their worlds. They are massing for a final confrontation, circumventing their inability to move large bodies of ships whilst able to

take advantage of the disarray caused by our own warp transit. But that means we must be close. Really close.’

‘Indeed.’ Appius stepped around the outer edge of the circle to stand next to Sigismund but did not enter. ‘Proximity does not solve our primarch’s final test. The Unseen have been stripped of every advantage except for the one that all defenders possess. They know where the enemy must attack for victory, and they have carefully measured our strength and capabilities. Since the beginning they have learned as much about us as we have of them. They thought they knew us, from experience with the fleets they destroyed, but they have never faced a primarch. So, I ask you one more time, how do you attack? What is your next move?’

Sigismund’s blade flashed up, its tip stopping a hair’s breadth from Appius’ neck a metre outside the bounds of the circle.

This was it, the time he had finally extended himself too far. Everything was pain, from his rebuilt chest and face to the third eye that throbbed with the ache of continuous exposure to the warp. The earlier sessions Rigantis had delegated to his peons, but this phase of the transit, these last eighteen days, had been his alone. Nearly three subjective weeks of peering into the warp to gauge its moods and currents, making every adjustment, watching for sworls and eddies that would send them off course, or backing tides that would strand them forever.

The Zuma Novator could no longer see with his physical eyes. The exploding armaglass had taken that from him, and any operation to replace them was too close to the other organ, risking not only the death of the Mechanicum biologis but also the secrets of the Navis Nobilite. As it was, he had reluctantly allowed them to build a new breathing apparatus after the collapse of his lungs in the brief period he had spent in vacuum before Thorl had

dragged him into the pressurised main compartment – a period that his inherited post-human physiology had thankfully extended by at least twenty seconds, proving itself as essential to his continued existence as the Terminator armour had been to his companion.

But by the Bells of Vigat, it hurt as though the light of Sol herself burned in his chest, every breath and mental tremor breaking down a tiny piece of his last remaining wall of sanity.

Perhaps it had fallen already and this waking dream of endless colour and nothing was just hallucination, his body strapped down on a medicae cot somewhere on the *Phalanx* rather than sitting in his chair atop the soaring Navigation tower.

No light of the Astronomican to check their progress, no drops into realspace that would warn the Unseen what was happening, which meant there could be no relent from the task of guiding the ship. Constant observation, calculation and dead reckoning.

Can it be done? Dorn had asked.

Rigantis had liked that. The primarch assumed that if it was at all possible, the Zuma Novator would be capable of doing it. Flattery? Not any more. When they had spoken on Terra, the leader of House Zuma might have had his vanity stroked a little by the approach of the primarch and his softly spoken compliments, but now Rigantis knew he was worth every word.

The primarch had devised another of his grand plans, which if it worked – if Rogal Dorn's intellect had truly solved the riddle and the best of House Zuma were equal to the task ahead – would bring the Imperial Fists to one of the Kapikulu core systems. Not one of the worlds they had been probing for around Nightcastle, now garrisoned and protected by reinforced Unseen fleets. Dorn had aimed further afield, for a system just a little under a thousand light years away from Nightcastle. A capital world, maybe

even the home world. A system the primarch had deduced was close to the centre of the web of warp gates they had started to uncover. A world the Unseen would think still beyond attack.

Speed and overwhelming power was required. As soon as they detected an enemy ship in their midst, the Kapikulu would send for reinforcements. Their warp gates would be closer to the world than the jump points of Imperial ships. An expedited attack, sudden and overwhelming, no time to muster a fleet after translation.

If only one vessel could make the trip, it had to be the *Phalanx*. Nothing else was equal to the task.

Forty thousand legionaries had been gathered aboard, along with the last gunships and drop pods from across the fleet to allow them to make planetfall in three waves. No escorts, no support ships, no Imperial transports, nothing but the Imperial Fists and their battle station.

And, of course, Rogal Dorn.

Only the primarch could have lit that fire of ambition in Rigantis. Another, Horus or Fulgrim, might have charmed him into gambling the future of his House on not only this insanely difficult jump but also the entire crusade, but Rogal Dorn did not possess that same ease and charisma. His presence inspired awe, at times, but more often something more subtle yet stronger.

Confidence.

Rigantis had spoken with the primarch of the Imperial Fists and had known – *known* – that if he took House Zuma to the Occluda Noctis, he would have more power and prestige than any other Novator for a generation and more.

Still he had that same feeling and it made him smile, though that quickly turned to a grimace as fresh agony wracked his mended body and tired psyche.

Glory or nothing. Victory or death.

There was no luck here, there was no toss of a dice. The factors were simple – either the primarch and Rigantis

were right, or they were not.

The answer to that was upon them.

Rigantis rechecked his calibrations and made one more observation of their position in reference to the flow that had brought them here. Outside the dome, dancing like reflected starlight on waves, motes of light sparkled in the impossible ether.

Not starlight. Not the Astronomican. The warp presence of sentient beings. Millions of them, clustered together yet still no more than a tiny candle amidst the corona of a star – but they were there.

He sent the signal to disengage the warp drives.

He closed his third eye, surrendering himself to total darkness, weary beyond imagining. To see the crash and thrash of another transition might have broken him then, so close was he to losing control of mind and body.

Warp darkness joined physical darkness. The sirens stopped and a tense silence followed. They had transitioned safely, but where?

If this worked…?

He had dared not dream before, but why not? House Zuma, with control of the warp gates through the Occluda Noctis… Even if he never felt the evolutionary call to become the next Paternova of the Navis Nobilite, he would wield almost as much temporal power.

They were already at battle stations, but a fresh, strident alarm clamoured across the *Phalanx* and set the pilaster dome ringing.

Enemy contacts.

Rigantis had no idea where the *Phalanx* had arrived, but they had certainly found something.

Rann found himself looking up, past the towering, dome-topped buildings of the Unseen, into a sky afire with jets and detonations. From the ground it looked almost calm, the much closer clamour of bolters and snap of lasers far

more urgent than the constant rumble of engines and attack craft cannons. The creak and growl of Land Raider and Spartan heavy transports echoed from ahead as the first squads of the 45th Assault Cadre pushed on towards the cluster of buildings that Lord Dorn had identified as the seat of planetary government.

Iago ordered the formation to the left, into a set of many-windowed buildings that looked like administration blocks rather than domiciles. This whole area of the city was filled with them, much like the growing arcologies on Terra that housed the millions of clerks and scholars required to run the ever-growing Imperium.

He glanced up again, seeing the higher blaze of light that was the *Phalanx* in low orbit, its guns targeting other starships as they attempted to drive the behemoth away from their world. They would not succeed.

It was a sight not too dissimilar to the one he had known growing up – although as one of the Rann living on the River of Life, he had not known that the star circling the heavens of Inwit had been a fortress. So many worlds had seen that sight in the hours and days before compliance, but to Rann it had only ever been an ally, an omen of good fortunes.

Pounding up the steps, shield ready and bolter couched on its firing slot, Rann thought back to the compliance of Inwit. The Emperor had arrived, and His son had greeted Him as the long-lost father He was. But what if Dorn had not recognised the Emperor's authority? What if the guns of the *Phalanx* and the genius of the primarch had been turned against his creator? What crushing might of the Imperium would the Emperor have brought to bear on the recalcitrant world of ice?

He shuddered at the thought even as he crashed through the wooden doors into the foyer of the building. Tiles cracked under the tread of heavy boots as the breachers pounded towards the stairs opposite. There were still

primarchs to find. Would they all come as peacefully as Rogal Dorn or Horus?

He barely had to think about his surroundings. Another world, another building, another flight of stairs. Different foes, but of a type. The squad barely exchanged a word, working as one, the vox quiet but for short reports. The same act had been performed by this group of warriors, or a very similar combination, a hundred times before. They were separate parts of a single killing mechanism.

Rann fired at the figures behind the balustrade above, recognising them as targets at the same moment as he became aware of their existence. The orders were simple – purge all Unseen. The blow would be so swift and shocking the enemy would capitulate within hours. There would be no energy-sapping campaign of resistance.

Ruby-red flashes from above. He returned fire, pivoting the shield to take the las-shots as he squeezed the trigger and raked explosive bolts across the target area. Flesh and marble scattered in equal measure from the fusillade.

Crashes upstairs signalled the jump pack squads' arrival, coming at the foe from the mid-levels. More legionaries deployed by gunship onto the roof, completing the three-pronged offensive.

The Unseen were slippery, but there would be no escape. Twenty thousand legionaries in the first drop, enough to conquer a city in less than an hour. It would be a signal to the others. Where one world could fall, all worlds could fall. Rann no longer believed in fate, though he had been raised amid prophecies of great destiny and tales of omens and star-fortuned heroes.

Even so, as he ascended white stone stairs splashed with Unseen blood, stepping over their mangled remains with his battle-brothers to each side, Rann understood the nature of inevitability.

Gidoreas arrived at the bottom of the Stormbird's ramp just

a second after his primarch, but already Rogal Dorn was ten metres ahead and accelerating fast. Beyond the dim light of the gunship, the Master of the Huscarls raced into ruddy twilight, the setting sun gleaming from white walls and towers ahead. The fortress, which resembled the one that had been erected at Nightcastle in design but dwarfed it in size, was surrounded by airstrips, launch pads and secondary buildings. Communications relay dishes pointed to the stations in orbit and sirens wailed their warnings in the distance, picked up by the auto-senses of Gidoreas' war plate.

The vista ahead was not welcoming. Towers and gun pits crewed by hundreds of the enemy waited for the Imperial Fists. Tanks rumbled from underground garages and companies of infantry mustered out of barracks, all breaking into flashes of indistinct colour inside their spectral fields so that the entire defence complex flickered with the haze of moving troops. Walls and wire, trenches and bunkers completed the network of fortifications, all built or dug into a flat plain that covered a hundred square kilometres and more.

It was the most heavily defended place the *Phalanx* had been able to detect from orbit. That made it the perfect target for what Rogal Dorn wanted to demonstrate. Victory here would prove that there was nowhere the Unseen would be safe.

Above, delta-winged craft circled, tight-formation squadrons converging on the Imperial Fists' position. Drop pods and gunships continued to fall like hail around the Unseen base, trails of fire against the dusk. Looking past the fall of his brothers with magnified vision, he could see the fiery gleam of the *Phalanx*. The Imperial Fists' base ship had come as low as possible to reduce the drop time by a few vital minutes. He fancied he could see the flare of void shields as the massive vessel endured the continuing attacks of the Unseen ships that had pursued ever since it

had broken warp.

Around ten more were en route, less than two hours away, bringing enough firepower to finish what their compatriots had started.

That was the tightness of the primarch's timeline and the reason he did not wait for his Huscarls. His bolter, *The Voice of Terra*, barked constantly, the flicker of shots finding their mark amongst the Unseen, each round bringing death to a foe of the Emperor. The outer walls had already crumbled beneath the bombardment, and through the broken masonry Dorn led his sons.

Rumour of the golden giant had obviously reached this far into the Kapikulu Continuum, the mere approach of the primarch forcing the Unseen to give ground. Huscarls and Templars followed as swiftly as possible, pouring through the breaches, the mass of a thousand Imperial Fists squads following them as the VII Legion continued to land.

About five kilometres from the main stronghold the primarch stopped, his sons gathering about him among hundreds of Unseen dead, the armoured bodies of dozens of their own left amid the tangle of debris. Rites would be observed later, if possible. Unseen tanks circled at a distance, their lascannons burning streaks through the darkening air, scores left aflame by gunships breaking through the aerial cordon.

By the light of burning wrecks and the searchlights of the defence towers, Rogal Dorn stood with his sword pointed towards the fortress in clear challenge. His voice rang out, through his external address and over every vox-channel, eclipsing all other communication. If the Unseen could understand what he said, he would be heard.

'I am Rogal Dorn, primarch of the Emperor of Mankind. We have waged a long war, but the end has arrived and will be swift. We bear no ill will against those that agree to join the Imperium, but have no mercy for those that continue to resist. After I demonstrate the power of the Emperor, I will

ask you only once more if you are willing to join with all of humankind. Do not choose unwisely.’

Moving through the ruin of the aerial attack, Gidoreas approached the primarch. He heard the hiss of general vox-channels closing but was still connected via the command link.

‘Librarian Thorl, the time is upon us,’ Dorn broadcast to the *Phalanx*.

‘Lady Evida assures me the astropathic hall has been correctly attuned, and we are ready to execute your command.’

‘You can reach our foes, within their walls, inside the shields?’

‘We sense nothing, as before, but through you and our brothers, Lord Dorn, we are aware of their presence. We shall begin with those outside and through them find those inside. Their shields and walls will mean nothing.’

The primarch took a moment, looking left and right as battle still raged.

‘Begin.’

Aboard the *Phalanx* the astropaths of the fleet and the Librarius of the Legion came together as one, their thoughts binding and magnifying through the psychic array of the broadcasting hall. On the surface, sixty kilometres below, Gidoreas watched as the Unseen started to die.

‘It is with a much-lightened mood that I can record a great success in the war against the Unseen. I have not been privy to any details, but across the fleets news has spread of the capitulation of a Kapikulu world, surely paving the way for a journey towards compliance. I am not optimistic, for the experience on Scathia proves that nothing is certain, but I do think we shall all look back on this as the most significant moment of the Night Crusade.

‘There are likely still secrets within the Occluda Noctis, dangers yet to face and difficulties to overcome. The Great

Crusade can never stand still until the Imperium reaches its fullest extent. I have come to hate the Kapikulu, but I cannot let that hatred fester, for soon they may be servants of the Emperor like myself. Their culture, their technologies, their people will become part of the Imperium of Man.

'It is hard to comprehend at the moment, but perhaps in a year from now, or a decade, I shall meet one of them in a time of peace. We might share a drink, raise a toast to fallen companions, and reflect on all that we share rather than the short violence that divided us. When the last battles have been fought, such shall be the legacy of this mighty endeavour.'

'It is in our nature to defend ourselves when attacked, and many on both sides have been lost in our battles,' said Rogal Dorn, standing on the dais that had once been the addressing station for the Kapikulu Continuum senate. It was not a large room – barely space for thirty representatives now filled by the primarch and his guard of Huscarls. 'But it is in the nature of civilised beings to overcome their nature with reason and thought.'

Fifteen of those representatives had survived the assault on the senate buildings by the 45th Assault Cadre and had presented themselves to the primarch as personal guarantors of the world's surrender. A worldwide ceasefire was in effect and, if the senators' assertions were true, the fall of this world would be the catalyst for Continuum-wide surrender as Dorn had hoped. Gidoreas watched them closely, trying to read their expressions. They had the look of men and women present at their own funerals, despite repeated assertions that there would be no reprisals against them for their war against the Imperium.

Their wariness was understandable.

'We have offered our unconditional capitulation, but we cannot vouchsafe your people entirely,' said a woman in a

black dress and silver jacket, small gemstones studding the collar and a silver band around her brow. ‘There may be commanders among our military that refuse the order. We cannot guarantee there will not be resistance or unrest. Many loved ones have been killed and our people might look to even the score.’

‘None of which is unexpected,’ Dorn replied, keeping his voice quiet. ‘Our forces will work together to establish a real, lasting peace in the days and years to come. Compliance is a process, not an act. We will be lenient where possible, we do not seek retribution for its own sake. Our iterators will work with your branches of government to soothe troubles and propagate the benefits of the Imperium, as I promised you. In return, we will learn much from you that will benefit all of humanity.’

‘You speak of the warpways,’ said an elderly senator, his greying hair cut at the shoulder, portly, in grey and blue trousers and shirt, a jacket of white on the bench beside him, a similar band of gems on his forehead, their colour and arrangement different to the spokesperson. ‘I do not think they will be of much use to you. Like much of our civilisation, the science of their creation is lost to us, a legacy of brilliant ancestors after the Time of Woes.’

‘Yes, your latent psychic connections to your environment, your ships and your weapons explains a lot about how you were able to keep us at bay for so long.’ Rogal Dorn moved his gaze from one representative to another, addressing them as one. ‘The secrets of much Dark Age technology have yet to be unlocked, but together we will come to understand it. If you provide our allies in the Mechanicum of Mars with the implants you use, they may be able to engineer an equivalent that is less intrusive.’

The senators looked at each other in confusion and muttered to one another. The woman that had spoken earlier stepped forward from the group.

‘You speak of the mindbonds as though they are a choice

we make.’ She seemed in pain, though Gidoreas could see no injury on her. A trembling hand rose to the side of her head. ‘This is what it is to be part of the Kapikulu Continuum. This is the scar we bear from the Time of Woes when we laboured and died for the Regency.’

‘These terms mean nothing to me,’ Dorn said gently, stepping down from the dais. ‘The filaments in your brains, you call these the mindbonds? Who are this Regency that gave them to you?’

The senators shook their heads and whispered an incantation that Gidoreas did not understand, touching their fingers to their brows and then splaying the hand over the heart.

‘The Regency of Doeth. Our enslavers for a thousand years,’ said the woman when she had finished her genuflection. ‘Their worlds moved by thought alone, but our ancestors were dull, their minds clumsy. The Regency of Doeth changed them. Not so that they could perform their enslavers’ great feats, but so that they might hear their demands, act as they wished, perform their labours for them. And the mindbonds were our leash, the shackles that bound us to them when whips and guns could not keep us from liberty.’

‘How do you still have them?’ asked the primarch. ‘You speak of the Regency as though they are no more.’

‘They died, the legends say. Died screaming in terror. Our people rebelled and fled and came here. We continue the legacy of the Kapikulu. The mindbonds are part of us. They grow with us and die with us. I see in your eyes that you are starting to understand. Your mind-breakers could not placate them, could they?’

‘You were born with them. The Regency altered your genetics so that you grow these psychic strands.’ Dorn spoke the words without emotion, but Gidoreas could see that he was containing a rapidly growing agitation. He had not seen him like this since the Emperor’s Children had

precipitously ended the ceasefire on Scathia. The primarch drew in a deep breath, recovering some of his equilibrium. ‘The Emperor and His Mechanicum allies know much about genetic manipulation. There may be some way of removing the Regency’s interference…’

‘Why would we change?’ said another of the senators. ‘We are free now, but our mindbonds are what make us Kapikulu, part of what we were and what we are.’

‘They have aided us greatly at times,’ added the rotund senator. ‘It is the mindbonds that allow access to the arteries of the warp.’

Rogal Dorn looked at the senators, and by the set of his jaw Gidoreas recognised that he was conflicted, hiding his anguish behind a stoic facade. The primarch motioned for the captain of his Huscarls to precede him out of the doors into the antechamber. Once there, he took several paces back and forth.

‘What is the problem, my lord?’

Dorn looked at Gidoreas and then away, glancing back towards the senate chamber. His fingers flexed into fists.

‘Compliance is for human worlds.’ As he said the words, he relaxed, as though the utterance of this unburdened him. ‘The Kapikulu are no longer human.’

‘They think they are, lord primarch. And what if they are not? There are xenos that have found accord with the Imperium. You have masterfully guided us to victory! This is what you have strived for.’

‘For now, but the Emperor has declared that the galaxy shall belong to humanity. The Kapikulu rebelled before, they may do so again. I am convinced more than ever that the Emperor did not choose His words without great care. “Remove this hidden foe.” Our purpose was made clear. We must remember the role of the Legiones Astartes. There is no gain in sparing a future enemy.’

The primarch took a deep breath and straightened, fixing the Master of the Huscarls with a determined stare.

Gidoreas could only guess at his thoughts. Were they raging, arguments flaring back and forth like warring factions, or was his mind a cold machine of strategy, analysing and breaking down the problem into its constituent parts to be solved?

'Stand ready for orders, captain.' Dorn opened the doors and stepped through, Gidoreas at his heel.

When they were within, the primarch spoke, the protests of the senators quickly drowned in a roar of combi-bolters.

Sigismund turned towards the voice to see a thin, robe-draped figure step into view, leaning on a flame-topped staff.

Malcador. The Emperor's Regent.

'He was right, of course, your gene-father,' the ancient psyker continued. 'The Kapikulu could never have been part of the Imperium. The warp gates were the real prize. I mean, we're still learning lessons from them. Very valuable lessons.'

'The Night Crusade was almost a failure,' said Rann. 'We only ended the Kapikulu with the aid of the Emperor's Children. That hardly speaks praise of Lord Dorn.'

'We did exactly what we had been tasked to do,' said Sigismund, knowing what that meant – and what it meant to do other than had been expected of him. 'Lord Dorn followed the Emperor's orders.'

'That is the truth of it, yes,' said Malcador. His gaze remained on Sigismund for some time, a little disquieting in its intensity. 'He did not do what he thought was best, nor what he thought had to be done. What he had been told to do. That is why the Emperor has always trusted your gene-father more than any other. Extemporisation, improvisation, genius are all very useful, but more often than not, what He desires is someone to do precisely what He tells them to do.'

'That still doesn't explain why we were brought back to

Terra while there were still worlds to conquer,’ said Rann.

Malcador laughed, a rasping, cynical noise, and his expression was unkind as he replied.

‘Would you hand the keys of your fortress to anyone less than utterly trustworthy, Fafnir of the Rann?’

‘I had not considered it in those terms.’ The assault commander looked abashed at his error.

Malcador was turning away when a thought struck Sigismund.

‘Our lord knew he had time to fortify Terra,’ said the Templar. He looked around, a sweep of the arm taking in everything around them. ‘From the Night Crusade. Seeing how Horus campaigned, he knew that Horus would never make the quick attack, would never strike for Terra at the outset.’

‘That is indeed true,’ said the Regent. ‘Horus does not hesitate, he is no coward, but he does not act until the odds are in his favour. There were too many loose ends, too many uncertainties for him to simply bring his traitors straight to the Emperor’s Palace. Your gene-father knew this, though he has been watching every day for the sign that the attack is coming. I know that he would always wish for one more day to prepare, but I think he timed things pretty much perfectly.’

‘But why let him do as he pleases? Horus, I mean.’ Sigismund banged a fist onto the rampart. ‘Why wait for the attack to land rather than block it earlier, as the blade was being drawn back?’

‘Because that was not the Emperor’s command,’ Malcador replied blandly. ‘Over the coming days, when all is dark and death surrounds us, you should remember that. Whatever happens, whatever reverses occur, Rogal Dorn and his Legion are exactly where the Emperor wants them to be. Take heart from that and act accordingly.’

The Regent turned his head suddenly, as though noticing something. His gaze went to the east, towards the towering

pillar of the Astronomican beyond the main walls.

‘Time is growing short, and I have others to speak to before the day ends.’

With no more farewell, Malcador departed by the small door through which he had appeared. Sigismund said nothing, perplexed by the exchange, memories afire with recollections of the burning of the Unseen and the breaking of their worlds.

‘I’d rather face down a hundred orks than talk to him,’ grunted Rann, flexing his neck from left to right. ‘He unsettles me. Don’t you have a grim feeling that he knew what we were going to talk about and came all the way out here to have his say?’

Sigismund kept his peace. He’d been reminded of something he had left dormant for some time, but he felt a time of wakening coming. The return to that purpose he had learned in the Night Crusade. The truth about the Legiones Astartes and Rogal Dorn.

To become Death, and in doing so, to be the end of war.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The First Wall*, *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, and several audio dramas. He has written many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including the Dawn of Fire novel *The Wolftime*, *Indomitus*, *Ashes of Prospero*, *Imperator: Wrath of the Omnissiah* and the Last Chancers series. He also wrote the Rise of the Ynnari novels, the Path of the Eldar and Legacy of Caliban trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Warhammer Chronicles omnibus *The Sundering*, and, for Age of Sigmar, *The Red Feast*. In 2017, Gav won the David Gemmell Legend Award for his novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

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An extract from *Sigismund : The Eternal Crusader*.

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The storm wind breathed across the Ionus Plateau. Summer heat and dry winds had pulled the dust up into the air so that now a layer of cloud lurked on the horizon, flickering with lightning, bruise-dark smudged with ochre. The plain had once been an ocean, or so the story ran. The waters had long since drained away, leaving dust where there had been a seabed and mesas of stone that had been mountains beneath the waves. The tombs of long-dead kings stared down from those mountains at the drift camps at their feet. They were called camps even by those who had been born in them. They were home to the millions that the great war for and against Unity had pushed from the cities and hives to the north and south. Alleys tangled through walls made from scrap and fabric. Smoke rose from cooking fires, along with the cries of the dying and the songs of the living. On and on it went, rolling beyond sight to meet the edge of the world.

This was the land taken by the lost. Even for the despots who hungered for dominion, it was a shunned place. The monarchs who had bored their palaces and tombs into the mountains had left their mark on the land in the form of stories of enchanter kings and tales of ghost voices laughing from the mouths of deserted palaces. It had been an empty place for millennia, but then new armies had marched across the world: gene-wrought armies in skins of metal. Cities became pyres as warlords new and old tried

to make new realms or hold on to what they had. Refugees had come to Ionus, first a few and then tens of thousands. They had made homes and had children, and done what humanity does even as the world is falling into fire – they had survived. Now the wars were supposed to be over. From many warlords there had come one who called Himself 'Emperor', and He had proclaimed the tattered realms He had conquered not many lands but one. One Imperium.

For the people in the drift camps of Ionus, this new Unity had been neither a blight nor a triumph. As with all the other wars in all the other years, the new peace was a distant irrelevance. Life remained as it had been, balanced on sharp edges, unsoftened in its cruelty. The stories of the old kings of the mountains had become the founding myths of murder gangs that ran the alleys at night with sharp knives and crowns of blades. Spring winds sometimes brought poison from the north. Those of autumn, the smell of the dead left on the mountain slopes for the carrion birds. In winter, ice clotted the gathered dew, and in summer Sol breathed furnace heat and summoned thirst to steal the spit from people's mouths. There was no change, nor hope, just the certainty of struggle.

Sigismund could taste the storm on his teeth like he was biting copper. He was breathing hard as he twisted down an alley between two shacks. Behind him the cries rose, ululating up into the storm wind. They were close.

He reached the dead end of the alley and looked behind him in time to see a figure come around the corner at a run: wiry muscle and scarred skin dusted with white ash, a mask and crown of jagged metal, bones and skin hung on cords. The blade in the figure's hand was a hooked smile of plasteel. It was a Corpse King, one of the gangs that hunted and harvested in this part of the drift.

Sigismund jumped up, grabbed on to the edge of the roof, and hauled himself up. He started running, boards shaking

under his strides. Ahead of him, a metal pylon jabbed up from the roof into the darkening sky. The storm was a dark wall, curving up from the land into the heavens. Behind him, the Corpse King vaulted up the side of the alley and landed in a crouch. In the distance, the storm spoke. Thunder growled through the air. Lightning sparked in its depths. It was an angry god of a storm.

Sigismund's eyes caught on a lightning flash, and his stride stuttered. There had been something there in the clouds, glinting in the flare of energy. Another flash, and there it was again, and not just one but several, glinting motes in the roiling murk…

'Come down to the kingdom!' shouted his Corpse King. 'The dead want you!' The ganger was closing, almost on him. Sigismund kicked his run into a sprint. A second Corpse King climbed onto the roof. She had knives in her hands and finger bones in her hair.

Sigismund reached the pylon and ducked behind it. For a second, he was out of sight of the gangers. He picked out the metal bar he had left propped against the pylon. The first Corpse King came into view at full sprint. The metal bar hit him in the throat, just under the mask. Sigismund slammed the tip of the metal bar into the youth's chest, and then swung it up into his face. The crude mask mashed into skin and bone, and the ganger was falling, bone fetishes clattering, blood and air gasping from between broken teeth. Sigismund could hear the second Corpse King running across the roof. The one on the floor pushed up, hooked blade in hand. Sigismund slammed the metal bar down once, hard, and brought it up just in time to meet the second murder ganger as she came around the side of the pylon. A blade flashed out towards Sigismund. It was hooked, a polished sliver of scrap, the hilt wound in green-blue plastek and human hair. The cut was fast, but Sigismund was already swinging the metal bar and the Corpse King did not have time to duck back before it

crashed into her upper arm. She staggered, crying out, arm dangling. The ganger's other knife sliced out. He darted back. She was up and coming for him, cursing, stabbing and slashing.

Sigismund had heard from one of the other orphans that there was supposed to be an art to fighting, that warriors in the distant wars knew ways of using blades and guns, and hands and feet to kill and survive. He did not know if that was true, but here, in the drift camps, the only art was being the one left alive.

A blade point slashed across his left forearm. A sharp feeling and then a sudden soft lightness in his legs and gut as the shock slammed through him. Nausea followed in a flood. The knives flashed forwards again. Sigismund swung the bar into the masked face. The Corpse King crumpled, blood dribbling from behind the mask.

Sigismund could feel his hands shaking. There were more running feet pounding the roof. Cries rose. He needed to move. There were many of them, at least twenty, maybe more. Too many. They had come hunting again as though roused by the coming storm. Too many to face all at once. He had learnt that since the first time he had fought. In that first fight, he had got the best of it somehow, sent some down bloody into the dust. The rest had run, the cost suddenly higher than they wanted to pay for the skin of a few orphans. Since then the gangs had come for them repeatedly: the Queens of Hades with their manes of cadaver hair; the Blood Spectres in crude armour dipped in red paint; the Breath Stealers, gasping out strings of rattling noise from tongueless mouths. Most were youths little older than Sigismund; with every winter there seemed to be more, and they always came back. He had learnt: you did not face them together, you faced them one at a time.

He ran to the edge of the roof, jumped, hit the dust, crouched, rolled, and came up running again. Blood was dripping down his left arm, the weight of the metal bar

dragging at the right. His chest felt like it was going to explode. He ducked down a half-collapsed opening between two shacks. Running footsteps shook the roof panels above and behind him.

'Come back, little one!'

Keep going, he needed to keep going. He reached the end of the alley. The space beyond was a wide oblong open to the sky. A charge reservoir sat in the middle of the oil-stained ground. A web of cables stretched from the machinery up to a soar of electro-kites in the sky above. Sparks were already running down the cords. Sigismund ran towards a narrow gap between the charge reservoir and a shack wall. He reached it just as he heard the first of the Corpse Kings reach the opposite roof edge. He did not look around as they dropped down and ran after him. He slowed, just enough. One of the Corpse Kings was just a few strides behind him, a spiked club held in two hands. There was a niche in the wall, made by the poor join between two sheets of rusted metal.

'You're ours now!' the ganger snarled.

Sigismund ducked into the niche in the shack wall, pivoted, and brought the metal bar around. It hit the Corpse King in the gut and folded him in two. Sigismund's knee met the masked face as it came down. He was not as strong as the ganger, but the falling weight of the Corpse King's head, and the rising knee, were enough to mash the mask into the face with a crack of bone.

Thunder roared in the ochre-and-iron sky. A tongue of lightning struck one of the electro-kites. The flash of light exploded in Sigismund's sight. He staggered. The bar dropped from his hand. He could not see. The world was white dancing with neon ghosts. There were cries close by, the sound of someone barrelling towards him. He jumped back almost too late. A sharp point scored across the meat of his left shoulder. The pain jolted through him.

'The gods of death are coming!' called a voice from close

to him. ‘They have come to choose! They have come to make us live forever!’

He saw something move behind the blur filling his eyes. He lashed a foot out, felt it connect, heard a grunt. He punched his open right hand in the direction of the sound, felt it hit something that felt like hair and the strap of a harness. He grabbed and yanked. The weight of a human body crashed into him. Arms flailed at him. He yanked again and heard the Corpse King slam into the metal of the charge reservoir next to them. He brought his knee up, felt it hit something soft, and then hit again and again, hearing the Corpse King gasping for air. There were shouts in the narrow space, more blurred images moving in the clearing fog. He landed one more knee, then shoved the body away from him and broke into a run. Lightning split the sky above. Thunder rolled, obliterating the sound of cries and feet behind him. He reached a shack wall, found a door and hauled it open.

The space inside was as empty as when he had scouted this route: lengths of rag folded and stacked in a corner, cooking pots made from cast-off munition casings, lumps of blast glass threaded on strings so that they caught the flashes of lightning from the open door. It was a home. Where the people had gone, he did not know; there were more ways to vanish in the drift than there were to live. He slammed the door closed and dropped the bar he had prepared across it. He turned, half stumbling, looking down at his left arm. Clotted blood and dust covered it down to the fingers. He picked up another metal bar he had left waiting and staggered across the shack as something heavy hit the door he had just shut. There was white fog at the edge of his sight. That one on the roof had caught him well, a deeper cut. He was slowing down. He could not slow down. He just needed to keep moving, keep them focused on him.

He pulled up the length of board he had loosened in the

shack wall. All the details he had prepared – the route he had run, when he had turned to fight, the bar to close the door, the backup weapons he had left himself – all of it was so that he could face the murder gangers one at a time, on his terms. The gangs that had come the last few times had given up with only a few of their kind lying bloody on the dust, but not tonight. Perhaps it was the storm, perhaps the Corpse Kings had decided to do whatever it took to run him and the others down. No matter the reason, they were not stopping.

He had ducked out of the shack just as the door he had barred gave way. He started to run. The white fog was spreading from the side of his sight. Above him, the storm clouds boiled with lightning. The ground dropped into a slope. He half ran, half tumbled down it. Behind him, the cries of the Corpse Kings rose and vanished in the drumming of the rain and roll of the thunder. He twisted to look back, saw one on the rooftops, then two, then three, more, more than he had ever seen on a hunt. This was not going to go like it had before.

Bright light surrounded him suddenly, pouring from the sky. He ducked and looked up. A shape turned in the air above him. He had seen flying machines before. Sometimes they slid across the sky above, trailing white from their wings. Sometimes they flew lower, and you could hear them chewing the air as they moved. Some looked like grey darts, and others like they were made by people who had heard of birds but never seen one. They were always distant, things of another world that did not touch the dust. This one was closer than he had ever seen before. Rain poured from its block-sided body and wings. Cones of blue-white fire breathed from its flanks. The sound of it shook his flesh down to the bone. He could smell the burning-fuel reek of it over the rain. Gun mounts twitched on its wing tips and snout. Its skin was dark in the storm light. The light shining from its belly held on Sigismund for a second

and then flashed up to the rooftops, where the Corpse Kings turned their heads up and howled.

Sigismund did not wait: he turned and began to run, feet sliding in the dust as it became mud. Above, the flying machine shifted across the sky, the beam of its light panning across the shack roofs. Sigismund reached an alley and ducked in as he heard the Corpse Kings' cries change in pitch. They were coming and he needed to reach the only family he had ever known before they did.

Four blows of thunder shook the sky as he reached the rock. A thumb of old stone, it jutted up from the sea of roofs. A fissure split its side, barely wide enough for a person to crawl into. There, in the cool dark, there was just enough space for a dozen people to lie or crouch, more if they were small. Faces looked up at Sigismund as he squeezed down the gap. Some were young, others had the years, but hunger or cruelty had kept flesh from their bones.

'Get the light out,' he said.

'What's happening?' asked Yel, rising to her feet, the blade-tipped pole in her hands.

'The Corpse Kings are coming,' he replied. 'A lot of them. We have to move and move now.'

'Slowly now,' said Yel, calmly. Her eyes were steady. Sigismund was suddenly aware that he was shaking. Pain and exhaustion and fear were juddering through him, like power through a charge coil that was about to blow. Yel looked at him, not blinking, waiting, steady. The eyes of the smaller ones in the cave were on them, wide in the light of the flame that rose from a rag lamp. He could feel their tension, the tense instincts that had kept them alive this long in a place that ate the alone and the lost. They were all looking at him and Yel and Coroban, the eldest three, all waiting. He forced his breath to slow and stilled the instincts that were screaming at him to shout and run.

‘You’re bleeding,’ said Coroban, moving up beside them, jerking his head at Sigismund’s left arm.

‘One of them snagged me,’ he said.

‘I should have gone with you,’ said Coroban.

‘You’re not fast enough,’ said Sigismund.

‘Neither were you,’ said Coroban. Sigismund almost smiled. Coroban was bigger than him, just as tall, but thicker in limb. He had come out of one of the techno-domains to the south and still had the remains of shackle-plugs in his spine and skull. Whatever had happened to him, he had got out alone, and made it to Ionus. Not fast, but strong. He had broken the skulls of three gangs who decided they wanted the meat off his bones, but he was too slow for the running fight that Sigismund fought. They had agreed on that after they had both nearly died. So, Sigismund led the hunters in a dance and the others held the line, the best chance of survival if he failed. It had worked, too. Until now.

‘Is the route north open?’ asked Yel.

Sigismund shook his head, blinked. A hammer beat of pain and nausea was rolling inside his skull.

‘I don’t know. There are flying machines, too. They came with the storm.’

‘Flying machines?’

‘Hovering low. Tracing the ground with lights, like they are watching. They had guns.’

‘The war’s come,’ said Coroban.

‘We go west,’ said Yel.

‘That’s towards the mountains,’ said Sigismund. They all knew what he meant. The mountain tombs and ruined palaces were the haunts of the gangs. If they went towards them…

‘There will be fewer of them,’ said Yel. ‘If they are hunting then they won’t be watching their own patch. And if the war has come then I’d rather take my chances in the ghost caves than down here.’

Sigismund did not answer.

'You know I am right,' said Yel after a moment.

He looked around, at the eyes fixed on them.

'Where are we going?' asked Siv. The boy was new. They had found him walking on his own on one of the dust paths to the south. He had been clutching a piece of parchment that he refused to let go of, and neither he nor any of the others could read. No tears then, and none now, just a stillness that came from expecting nothing that was here now to be there in the next moment. Sigismund knew the look. It was his own.

'You are going somewhere safer than here,' he said, holding Siv's gaze, before looking back at Yel and Coroban.

'You will have to go now,' he said. 'I don't know how close they are or how long I can distract them.'

He began to move towards the way out.

'Come with us,' said Coroban, and he put his hand on Sigismund's shoulder to stop him. 'They will kill you.'

Sigismund looked around at Coroban and then at Yel and back at the other orphans of the drift, still listening, still watching. He thought of Thera, the eldest of the orphans when he was small. In his memory, he saw her touching her forehead to the piece of metal she called a weapon and going out to face the killers in their ragged crowns. She had stood up and never come back, but he and others had lived.

'I stay,' he said.

Coroban shook his head, but Sigismund was already working his way back up the gap in the rock, pulling the metal bar with him in his good hand.

He found his first Corpse King barely two hundred paces from the bolthole in the rock. The ganger was moving across an open patch of ground that was becoming a swamp, his head turning. He did not see Sigismund until he was just an arm's reach away. The Corpse King flinched

back, but the metal bar crashed into his shoulder, and then his legs. He fell. Spray showered up from the boards of the shack roof. Sigismund looked down at him. The ganger was writhing, trying to move with broken bones. Sigismund stood above him, looked up. In the distance he could see the light of one of the flying machines. Then lightning whipped across the belly of the clouds, turning the world blinding silver. The rain was pouring down him. Drops exploded in the sea of mud at his feet.

'I am here!' he shouted as the thunder roar faded. 'If your dead kings want me, then come and get me!' The ganger at his feet screamed – maybe a warning, maybe a cry of pain.

Sigismund saw a masked figure come to the edge of the roof next to the open ground. Another joined it and then another, and then a crowd of them were vaulting and swinging down. They did not come at him but spread out in a ragged crescent, wary.

Sigismund watched them. The blood in his veins was beating a roll of thunder that filled his ears. He could taste metal and bile. He tried to push the sensation down even as he felt it reach through his nerves to shake his fingers on the metal bar in his grip.

The crowd of Corpse Kings watched. The rain poured down them, pulling the white dust from their skin. Masks and crowns glinted in the flash of lightning. Some of them held knives, others switched their grips on hooked blades and spiked clubs.

'The lords of death watch us, little one,' called a taller figure who stepped from the half-circle. Teeth glinted on cords around his neck. A mask of blue plastek and battered metal covered his face. His chest was bare and gaunt, but muscle moved under the taut skin. He held a club capped with a ball of black metal in a crude echo of the statues of the dead monarchs that filled the tombs in the mountains. This was a leader. Sigismund could tell that from the way the others pulled back and waited, listening. 'There are

angels watching from the storm. They have come to pick those who will live forever. Your blood and bone will pay my crossing into the land of ghosts.’

Sigismund did not reply but raised the metal bar, fighting to hold it steady as he touched it against his forehead. He closed his eyes for a moment. He thought of Yel, and Coroban, and Siv, and the others running towards whatever safety they could find.

‘Look at you,’ called the Corpse King. ‘You have hurt a lot of us, but we cannot die. We rule death, and you are ours now, little one.’ The leader took a slow step forwards, the club resting on his shoulder, a long blade loose at his side. ‘We will find your friends, too. We know they have run. We will find them. A few might like to take a crown from us, eh? Live as kings…’

A flash of lightning, and the Corpse King lashed forwards. The club whirled. Sigismund just managed to jump out of reach of the swing. The tall leader half stumbled on his comrade still lying in the mud where Sigismund had planted him. Sigismund brought his metal bar up above his head and swept it down. The leader ducked back and swung his blade in a hacking arc that whistled through the air. The crowd were a blur of smeared crowns and masks beyond the rain.

The Corpse King stepped back to swing. Sigismund rammed the tip of the bar forwards. It was not a strong blow, but it was fast, and it punched into the leader’s mask. Blue plastek shattered. The ganger staggered. Sigismund wrenched the bar back and hammered it down. The leader tried to get his arm up, but the bar whistled as it crashed into the side of his head. The crude crown broke, and the ganger was falling, blood scattering into the mud and falling rain.

Sigismund almost fell as the weight of the blow pulled him over. In his ears he could hear a high ringing. The crescent of Corpse Kings seemed still, frozen as the moment fell

from past to future. Sigismund felt the breath sucking into his lungs. The moment pooled, gathering in the exploded second of raindrops hitting the ground.

The Corpse Kings charged. Howls tore from their lips. Sigismund swung just in time to meet a ganger with a copper mask. Then another was on him and he swung again, half blind. He hit nothing, but the figures in masks jumped back and he had an instant to swing the bar up over his head. They surged in. He whipped the bar around in a circle. The tip caught one on the side of the head and they went down, dropping like a broken doll. He whirled, using the bar's weight in place of strength, and slammed it into another. Bones broke, and a crowned figure was falling, screaming.

He might have stood a chance. He was fast and knew how to use his weight. He had lived through fights like this before. But there were more of them than there had been then. Many more. And these false kings of cruelty would not run when they started to bleed. They believed that gods or angels of the dead were watching to claim them. They would not stop. No matter how many of them he sent down to the mud. He was going to end, hacked down, and beaten to bloody meat.

Pain exploded in his left leg, and he was falling. One of the Corpse Kings had got behind him and swung a club into his knee. He felt a scream batter at his lips as he bit them shut. The Corpse Kings howled and surged in. The one who had taken his leg out pulled his club back to swing it into his head.

Somebody came out of the rain and cannoned into the Corpse King, felling the ganger. The figure had hold of the club it had wrenched from the ganger's hand and brought it up and down in a crushing arc. Lightning flashed and Sigismund saw Coroban whirl the club of the youth he had just killed and slam it into the centre of the next nearest mask. The Corpse Kings recoiled, shocked.

Sigismund could feel pain and weakness dragging at him like dead hands pulling him down into the mud.

'Why?' gasped Sigismund.

'Came to find you,' said Coroban. 'Could not let you do this alone.'

Sigismund rammed his bar into the ground and forced himself up beside his friend as the Corpse Kings charged. A blade scored a red line across Coroban's shoulder. Sigismund braced himself against the bigger youth's back and swung his weapon into the face of the nearest ganger. Coroban hit again and again, and two more went down. The masked faces were circling now. They wanted the kill, wanted the bones of these orphans who had stood against them. All they needed to do was wait and let exhaustion do its work. It was always that way with cruelty, Sigismund knew – it did not have to sacrifice, or struggle; it had only to be patient.

'You should have…' began Sigismund, fighting for breath. 'You should have stayed with the others.'

'No,' was all Coroban said. Sigismund noticed a ripple in the circle of gangers, as muscles tensed. 'You have stood for us alone enough times.'

A ganger with a pair of serrated knives leapt forwards.

Thunder and light filled the air.

The Corpse King came apart.

Sigismund's eyes clamped shut as a hot blast wave slammed into him. He stumbled. His sight was shattered neon, his head ringing. He pushed up. Coroban was shouting something. The Corpse Kings were running and there was something lying in the mud, blown-open ribs and bits of meat, and now he could hear Coroban shouting, and knew that his friend was terrified. He was shouting in the half techno-tongue of his birth, calling for help, for protection, for whatever neglected gods or spirits of his birth to hear him now.

Death was walking towards them through the rain. It was

the grey of storm clouds, clad in curved plates. Two eyes burned red in a face like the ram on a land train. It was huge, too huge. The rainwater exploded from its shoulders. A sword sat at its waist and a gun sat in its right hand. Its movement shook with smooth power, each step a threat. The image of it hammered into Sigismund's eyes and mind, filling them, crushing everything that was not an almost overwhelming instinct to run. It closed with them, unhurried, inevitable, death given form.

Coroban was still shouting, body shaking as though the storm charge were flowing through him. Sigismund felt something shift inside him, something that let him move his limbs. He yanked Coroban's arm.

'Run!' he shouted. Coroban's eyes were locked on the giant in the storm. Sigismund yanked his arm again. 'Run! Go after the others and keep running!'

Coroban's eyes focused.

'You–' he began.

'I can't run. It wants a life. I will stand. You run, run and keep the rest alive.'

'You can't–'

'Go!' Sigismund shouted, and shoved the big youth. Coroban barely moved, but his eyes met Sigismund's and he nodded; and then he was running, trailing his own blood into the mud.

Sigismund turned to face Death. It was almost on him. He noticed the lightning bolts set on its chest. Lightning bolts and a bird head with a hooked beak.

He tried to hold himself still. The pain in his limbs was distant now, not gone but unimportant, discarded in the mud.

Death took a last step and stopped in front of him. A buzzing purr vibrated from the giant. Sigismund could feel an ache in his teeth and eyes. Slowly, he tried to raise the crude metal bar that was his weapon. Death tilted its head, and then a growl filled the air. It took a moment for

Sigismund to understand that the sound was a chuckle.

Light suddenly filled Sigismund's world. Noise hammered him, and for an instant he thought that this spectre had called the storm down on him. Then the flying machine came in low, white light stabbing down from its nose, the rain shredding into mist in the downdraught from its engines. It hung above them, as Death looked at Sigismund.

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Dedicated to John French, the Emperor's Crusader.

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